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Stalin Prize Novel for 1942

This is a strikingly vivid historical novel of the life and times of Dmitri Donskoi, Grand Prince of Moscow, who defeated the Golden Horde in the famous battle of Kulikovo Plain in 1380.

A leading character in the story is Kyrill, unfrocked monk, slave, mason and architect who becomes the leader of a band of outlaws. Through his eyes, as he wanders from city to city in search of Aniuta, the woman he loves, we see the conditions of the Russia of that day and gain an insight into the aspirations of her people and, above all, into their passionate desire to be freed of the Tatar yoke under which they groan. With him in the cause of his adventures we meet a host of characters: monks, princes, peasants, soldiers, Russian and Tatar.

Borodin is the master of a strong colourful style and has made a profound study of his period. He presents an intimate detailed picture of Mediaeval Russ—whether in the halls of princes or the huts of peasants—which is the result of a unique blend of scholarship and creative imagination. This novel has been a great success in the U.S.S.R.

DMITRI DONSKOI

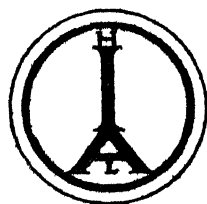
S E R G E I B O R O D I N

DMITRI DONSKOI

A NOVEL

Translated from the Russian by
EDEN and CEDAR PAUL

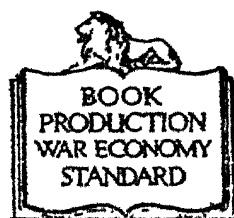
13th Thousand



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"Brothers and warriors ! It is better to be slain than to be captured. Brothers, let us mount our mettlesome horses and ride forth to see the blue Don."

Igor's Raid.



THIS BOOK IS PRODUCED IN
COMPLETE CONFORMITY WITH THE
AUTHORIZED ECONOMY STANDARDS

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Chapter I

MOSCOW

THE SPRING SHOWER WAS OVER. SILENT NOW IN THE MONASTERIES WERE THE bells that summoned the faithful to Mass. Pale sunlight was beginning to shimmer on the damp wooden roofs and on the moss-grown timbers, musty and green. A canopy of blue haze rose over Moscow into the azure skies. Cocks crowed on the farther side of the river. Logs drifted down-stream, while on the river banks women beat their washing on the laundry-floats and exchanged greetings with the lumbermen. ✓

Through the low arches of the Frolovski Tower horses galloped, splashing up black mud from the puddles. Merchants, lifting the skirts of their gowns, slipping and leaping, hugged the fences to avoid the mire on the roadway. Some of these men had bunches of keys jingling from their belts, whilst others leaned heavily on their staves. The market opened early.

Dmitri washed and dried his face. Then he crossed over to the window. He looked down on his town and listened to the sounds of the thaw. Close by, on a wintry bough, the liquid notes of a starling sounded, calling, calling. For a while its voice was hushed, only to burst forth again clear and melodious. Raindrops glittered, vaporous mist-wreaths climbed the skies—and the starling sang. The crowded town was filled with the freshness of a spring morning.

During these early hours, before the bustle and congestion of business began, Dmitri felt that duty did not yet call him. From the age of nine he had ruled over Moscow as Grand Prince, and the burden of those stern years would have been heavy even for a mature man.

Behind Dmitri lay many campaigns and numberless battles—Pereyaslavli, Vladimir, Galicia, Novgorod, Ryazan, Nizhni-Novgorod, Tver He was surrounded by rival claimants, each of whom tried to entice the others to join forces against the Grand Prince. Only by the sword could Dmitri persuade the others to rally round him.

One by one the foes of earlier days had become his comrades-in-arms. Dmitri of Suzdal put up a stubborn resistance, but in the end he, too, yielded to Moscow's sway. He was rewarded with the principedom of Novgorod and gave his daughter in marriage to the Grand Prince Dmitri of Moscow.

The early hours passed. Evdokia Dmitrievna was still asleep, and Dmitri listened to her quiet breathing, which blended with the whistle of the starling among the bare boughs. When she had first been brought to him, he was in his sixteenth year and did not know how to kiss a woman. He still blushed at the mere thought of her.

The wedding feast had been held at Kolomna, a place midway between Nizhni-Novgorod and Moscow, for since Moscow took precedence of Nizhni it would have been unfitting for Dmitri to go to his future father-in-law to arrange for the marriage. On the other hand, it would not have been seemly for the older man to search out the young bridegroom. This would have been deemed an insult to the principedom of Novgorod. By meeting at Kolomna, both parties were able to maintain their prestige.

That was why the festival was held at Kolomna. It was a lavish feast, for everybody must be made aware that Dmitri, Grand Prince of Moscow, was amply supplied with money. Other princes might squander their treasures on

carousing and dissensions, but for more than a generation the Muscovites had been saving. Dmitri's grandfather, Ivan Danilich, had been nicknamed "Kalita", which means "Money-bag". He would certainly not have been thus styled had his purse been empty. The Muscovites saved money and spent judiciously, reckoning to make a profit even on expenditure. Dmitri, prince of Novgorod, was most fortunate in having so good a son-in-law. But Evdokia was well worth the cost. Other princes had married Byzantine women who were shrivelled, swarthy, shrewish, with faces more like those of painted images than of girls. Dmitri's bride had a sweet and tender expression, flowing tresses, a shapely body. Yes, Dunya was a true Russian maid, the very spirit of her country, with her rippling laughter, her ringing voice, her merry and affectionate disposition, and her dimpled cheeks. While awaiting a visit from her betrothed she had been wont to sing as she plied her needle, embroidering a shirt for him. But when she became Grand Princess Evdokia Dmitrievna she ceased to sing, for that would have been unbecoming to her high station.

Hardly had the young couple reached home or been given time to get to know one another than disasters befell Moscow. The church of All Saints caught fire. It was a very hot day and a raging wind fanned the flames. In less than two hours the Kremlin, Posad, Zagorodye, and Zarechye were reduced to ashes. Dmitri took counsel with his cousin Vladimir. Then he issued orders that a road should be made, along which hewn stone could be brought to the town. In the spring of 1367 the building of a stone Kremlin was begun. Eleven years passed, and not only were staunch walls erected but likewise stone towers at various points. Strong as flint was the Kremlin.

But the reek of fire had not long been dissipated ere another calamity struck Moscow. A deadly plague which had been wandering over Russia during four years now ravaged the burned-out Muscovites. It is recorded that the sickness began suddenly, striking like a knife at the heart, shoulder-blades, or shoulders. The patient was consumed within as with fire, blood spurted into the throat, a lather of sweat oozed from every pore, and shivering ensued. Death followed inexorably; it was swift but agonizing. Corpses lay unburied, and barely ten out of every hundred among the stricken recovered. The sick died for lack of succour. Many houses stood empty, while in some of them infants alone survived. Little solace could be gained from the fact that other localities had suffered even more. In Smolensk, we are told, only five of the whole population survived. These five fled the town, locking the gates behind them and leaving the dead unburied within the walls.

Even the plague did not put a stop to dissension among the princes. Vasilii, Vsevolod, and Mihail, Princes of Tver, squabbled as to how the fortune left them by the late Prince Semion should be divided. Dmitri, however, succeeded in bringing about a reconciliation and then forced them to submit to Moscow. In the preceding year Tver had rebelled. Dmitri laid siege to the town, and with the blood of its inhabitants sealed the pact with Moscow, thus confirming the latter's supremacy.

Each battle brought more and more friends to Dmitri. With every year fresh regiments were incorporated into the Muscovite army. Even the princes were beginning to understand that in unity is strength. They came to Moscow of their own accord, there to serve under the Grand Prince, to make their peace or to forge bonds of friendship with him. It became increasingly difficult for neighbouring powers to oppose Moscow. The town had become wealthier, and engaged ever more earnestly in trade. It was easier to be shielded by Moscow than to stand alone on the Polovtsian Plain.

Olgerd of Lithuania, son of Gedimin, besieged Moscow but was unable to take the town. The Tatars attacked the distant marches of the Muscovite realm. The Bulgars on the Volga had got out of hand. Dmitri was given no respite, he had to learn the science of war, not from books, but on the battlefield, to learn about life on blood-drenched earth and to get to know men under the stern eyes of the boyars whom his tutor, Metropolitan Alexei, had appointed as guides to the boy.

Again, Dmitri had to brace himself against the Horde and settle affairs with Mamai. He made war upon the Bulgars and defeated them. Two years earlier, in 1376, he took Kazan. During the previous year his dangerous old foe, Olgerd of Lithuania, had died. And now the man to whom from childhood Dmitri had been so deeply attached was taken. Metropolitan Alexei was buried.

"Very learned and wise was Alexei."

This tutor had steeled Dmitri's heart. Out of a stripling he had forged a warrior, ready with the sword, though not with the pen. Alexei used to say:

"Do not seek to subjugate other races. But if they try to enslave you and your people, fight against them. Even though you are young in years, Dmitri, I conjure you to cast the pagan yoke from Russian soil. Were you but to break one thong of that yoke you would be blessed, and you would leave the task of completely shattering that yoke as a bequest to your descendants. A free nation is strong: an oppressed one daily grows weaker."

Soon the forty days of prayer for the dead would begin. Ah, the sadness of it!

The dying bequest of Dmitri's uncle, Simeon the Proud, was that all Russian princes should unite, but fearing lest strangers might get wind of this, he concluded in an allegorical vein:

"This I write to you so that the memory of our ancestors and of myself shall be kept green and that the candle we have lighted may not be snuffed out."

The "candle" symbolized the struggle against a foreign yoke.

Dmitri learned that quarrels had broken out in Lithuania among the sons of Olgerd. And in the Horde, too, feuds were rife. Well, these reports had their good side, for while Dmitri's enemies remained at strife among themselves he could be actively engaged in forcing unity upon Russia and thus cleanse her from the blood of former combats.

The rain of the night had stopped. Faintly from the Chudov church where Alexei's body reposed came voices lifted in song as Mass was said. The spring-time mists were drawn sunward from damp Moscow. The bird in the garden was silent. From the courtyard came the noise of wood-chopping and the clank of buckets as they were lowered into the well. In Valui's yard a rope was being fastened to a hatchet, for one of the pails had slipped to the bottom of the well. As you watched, the hatchet came to the surface. Women chaffed one another. The street was thronged with people going to market. Moscow had awakened and its daily routine begun. The hour had struck for the boyars to attend Dmitri's council. There was fresh business to deal with, and there were recent reports to receive. But Dmitri looked upon all this as light work. To him, inaction was an onerous burden. The hours when he had nothing particular to do weighed oppressively upon him.

Dmitri donned the unostentatious uniform he wore as Grand Prince. Having grown to manhood in the midst of campaigns, he liked his clothes to fit easily and be an asset rather than a hindrance. The Byzantine style would have hampered him as he took his walks abroad among his people. Besides, such

robes would have been too hot, for the stoves in his apartments were well stoked. His white tunic was comfortable and caught in at the waist with a narrow, gaily coloured Persian belt. He fixed the red band tightly round his head so that it should not slip down over his eyes. Then he dismissed the pages who had assisted him in his toilet and went to see his wife.

Evdokia was awake, and watched him in silence. He reciprocated her smile, and was about to take his leave, when he turned at the door and, going back to her, kissed her cheeks, which were still warm with sleep.

"Come home as soon as you can," she said. "Don't bury yourself in the Council Chamber."

"If I'm detained, Evdokia, you must not worry. We are passing through gloomy times and there is much to be done."

"Not another campaign, surely?"

"Your Dmitri has a campaign on his hands every day, and at night his mind is full of them. It is my job to think of all the things Moscow ignores. Were I to allow my energies to lapse for a moment, your Moscow would be changed out of all recognition by plague, famine, and the enemy's sword. And with Moscow, you too would be lost, sweetheart."

He strode into the dimly lighted hall, where pages stood in groups, chattering. From beyond one of the doors there issued the murmur of subdued and drawling voices. His boyars were awaiting him.

Before entering the Council Chamber he stopped and listened. Judging by the pronunciation, he gathered that a Serb was questioning the assembly as to the Grand Prince's appearance. Dmitri recognized Mihail Andreich Brenko's voice. He was gravely giving the required description.

"He is strong and courageous; tall and thick-set, with broad shoulders, corpulent and heavy."

Dmitri passed his hand over his paunch and buckled his belt tighter. This done, he drew himself up to his full height as if shaking off a superfluous load. He frowned while Brenko continued:

"His beard and hair are black. His glance is most striking."

"You seem to have summed up your Prince with remarkable perspicacity, Mihail Andreich," observed Dmitri, as he entered the Council Chamber.

Brenko was all confusion, while the Serb's face was the picture of horror at what had been said. But the Prince's radiant countenance soon reassured them, and they realized that their words had not given offence.

There were no important reports on the agenda, no wearisome appeals, no quarrels between boyars to be settled. It seemed as if the sun, peeping forth for the first time after the gloomy winter months, had dried all men's tears. Dmitri had no liking for such cloudless days. They seemed to him the harbingers of storm.

He questioned each of his boyars at great length on all sorts of matters.

Brenko said:

"This Serb, Peeper by name, has come here bringing with him his craftsmen. He is a master in the making of swords."

"What do you forge them with, friend?"

"With the Besermenian moon and a Lithuanian ray. It is not the appearance that is important, but the steel from which the blade is made."

"Then you know how to make alloys?"

"Yes, my lord."

"We'll have to test your skill. Have you found a house or are you in lodgings?"

"I have no house yet, but I am keeping my eyes open for something suitable in the town. If I like what I see, I shall settle down and become a proper Muscovite, sire."

"Your frankness pleases me," said Dmitri. "Who taught you your craft?"

"The Genoese. But I was apprenticed to a Venetian."

Dmitri continued to question Peeper, asking him about distant lands, their armies and weapons, their manners and customs, the encircling walls of their towns and the turrets crowning these walls whence the archers shot. Peeper was not the first maker of arms whom Dmitri had enticed over the border to Moscow. He himself questioned each man on arrival. Brenko's orders were strict. He was unfailingly to bring every master-craftsman to the Grand Prince for interrogation. Peeper, having been adequately questioned and his answers compared with previous information, was dismissed. Much that he had told was already current knowledge in Moscow and much had been ingeniously adapted.

The science of warfare took precedence over all Dmitri's interests. The times cried aloud for swords. His grandsires had conceived; Dmitri forged. For it was incumbent on him to surpass his forbears' achievements—and not in swords alone. He exported to the west honey, beeswax, hemp, tar, and many other products from the forests. Pelts, too, were sent, such as beaver, sable, and ermine. The west fancied fox and marten and squirrel—Dmitri sent squirrel and marten and fox. In return, a ceaseless stream of goods flowed through Novgorod, Volok, Ruza, and along the peaceful forest rivers. Boats sailed to Moscow with cargoes of Lithuanian swords, and lances made in Germany. Accompanying these, either on board or wandering along the forest roads, came armament-makers from Livonia and Swedish instructors in the arts of war. Coming up the rivers of the steppes to Moscow were barks carrying Moslem maces, strong coats of mail, light Tatar helmets, and Circassian harness for horses. Westward and eastward money flowed from Dmitri's purse. A good husbandman does not stint the seed if he knows that the field has been prepared for the sowing and that every seed will fall not on stony ground, but on well-tilled soil.

Seated among his councillors in the hall of audience, Dmitri asked Prince Fedor of Tarusa, who had whiled away the previous summer in Moscow, whether he had a sufficiency of people on his domain; whether he had started to sow as planned. The two men decided to put a larger area of the fertile lands near Tarusa under the plough and to sow corn so as to have a store against a rainy day, or, if necessary, for a lengthy campaign.

Brenko expressed surprise, saying:

"This has not hitherto been our custom. Merchants have always catered for our supplies."

Dmitri frowned and answered:

"Ay, for the sake of profit and advancement. And the nation has had to pay heavily. Not for nothing does the proverb run: 'To the people a beggar's pouch, to the merchant a palace.'"

The Prince of Tarusa reminded him:

"Novgorod starved. Let nobody forget that. The town was deserted. Anyone could have taken it without striking a blow. But God came to Novgorod's rescue and saved it from invasion. Another time the place may not be so lucky."

"God is merciful," murmured Brenko, crossing himself.

"You may pray to God, but God helps those who help themselves," commented the Prince of Tarusa.

He thereupon left the Council Chamber. The boyars followed. Then the monks, bowing and crossing themselves, passed through the doorway. There remained only the privy councillors and the court attendants.

"What news of the town?" Dmitri asked Brenko.

"The merchants are grumbling because some of the other trading centres such as Novgorod and Pskov are carrying on more flourishing business with the west than Moscow does. Ryazan trades with the Tatars. Smolensk with Lithuania. But we have to pass through Mongol territory if we are to reach the Greeks, through Pskov if we are to trade with the Franks. The east, whence we derived commendable profit, has been closed by the Tatars. Shemakha, too, is closed and Constantinople seems to have receded. How can Moscow's trade be fostered if such things are allowed to go on?"

"But we have to remember that the Swedes and the Shemakhan and Tatar merchants, whichever route they choose, have to take Moscow in their stride. We profit by that. The merchants err when they complain. From hearsay I gather that the Muscovites are the keenest and the wealthiest of merchants."

Brenko replied:

"So much the worse for us. The Tatars will get to hear of it. They will come and fleece our merchants and our own coffers won't be spared."

Dmitri grew angry as he pondered these Tatar activities.

All those of his family whom he remembered, all his spiritual advisers—the late Metropolitan Alexei and Abbot Sergei of the Troitsa monastery—had steeled his will and sharpened his mind in detestation of the heavy burden imposed by the Horde. Dmitri had learned his lesson well and had taken upon himself the tremendous task of shaking the Mongol yoke from off his people's shoulders.

He had fought against the Lithuanians without anger. They were princes under his suzerainty, men of his own race and kin professing the Christian faith. It was possible, in time of stress, to come to terms with them, to buy their submission, to cajole or to trick them. But from the east, from the steppes occupied by the Horde, at any moment the reek of burning Russian villages and the stench of Russian blood might assail one's nostrils. The boyars who had reared Dmitri had taught him how to deal with the Mongol khans, had buttressed his firmness of purpose and had made him fully aware of the affront given to Russia by the Mongol occupation.

His councillors sat in silence around him with eyes averted from his face. Here were Brenko, Vladimir Andreich Serpuhovki, Dmitri's cousin, and his brother-in-law, a refugee from Volhynia, the doyen of them all, Prince Dmitri Mihailovich Bobrok. The pages, too, were still grouped about the door. The Council might have sat endlessly had not one of these youngsters suddenly rushed up to Brenko, exclaiming:

"A Tatar stonemason has been brought along and he wants to know whether he can have audience with the Grand Prince."

An interview with the stonemason, too, could have been postponed, but just now it seemed timely, for it might serve to distract Dmitri from his silent wrath.

Rubbing his hands together as if to warm them after a frost, Brenko said:

"In that case we shall have to discuss the fortifications of Moscow."

Prince Bobrok, the Volhynian, glanced at Brenko in surprise. It was most unusual for his colleague to show interest in the battlements of the town. Besides, Brenko was a thrifty man. He knew how to suggest profitable under-

takings to his overlord, how to advise him in matters concerning trade, how to purchase arms at the cheapest rate, how to keep him posted as to the sale of land. But he never grasped the full significance of his office. He tended affairs with care and knew their scope. But his mind never penetrated beneath the surface. So Bobrok was delighted to perceive that at long last Brenko's eyes had been opened.

"I have been making inquiries about masons," said Brenko. "We shall have to construct stone shooting-turrets over the Kremlin walls. Some that have already been put up are built carelessly, while here and there a wooden turret has been placed on a stone wall. You yourself, Dmitri Mihailovich, have complained of this. So I sent a search party among the Tatars. An architect was unearthed in the khan's house. There is no point, I think, in delaying matters. Better order this craftsman to be ushered into your presence."

Dmitri raised his head.

"Let him come in," said he.

The Grand Prince sprang to his feet and, striding across the Council Chamber, stopped to stare out of the window. The building of the Kremlin was advancing rapidly. It was a harmonious structure, but needed more work to strengthen it. Brenko was right, the turrets needed to be completed and new ones erected elsewhere.

Chapter II

RUZA

AMID FORESTS AND MARSHES, IN A MAZE OF WOODLAND PATHS, THE TOWN OF RUZA is built on a little hill which overlooks a swiftly flowing river. In former times the Chudians dwelt here, but the memory of them has faded beyond recall. Only the river lapping the banks brings to light now and again a Chudian earring, an amber bead, a little filigree ring. Even the name of the folk who bartered furs for Arabian silver coins has passed into oblivion. Yet these coins frequently emerge on the surface of the sand, though the tribes that handled them have vanished for ever.

From generation to generation the House of Ruza carried on the Muscovite succession of princes. Here Ivan Kalita was born.

Dmitri's mansion was dilapidated, for the Prince had other cares and was far away.

But the cottages of the villeins were not empty. Through their roofs, thatched with black straw, smoke made its way. When the stoves were lighted it spiralled upwards to the sky through the thatch. The walls were made of thick, well-seasoned timber, to last for many years, and thus avoid the need of constant rebuilding. They were built in the days of Ivan Kalita.

The people lived at close quarters, but peaceably. Peaceably also dwelt the craftsmen settled round the town on the Grand Prince's land, people of all trades and professions—saddlers and hatters, blacksmiths and smiths who fashioned spearheads or made utensils of copper and of silver, forgathered from divers towns and tribes to live on the spacious demesne.

No doubt about it: Prince Dmitri's men, his villeins and warriors, fared well. The princes of Moscow were excellent managers.

"If you shoe a horse badly, he won't go far."

"If you stint a cow of her fodder, she'll yield no milk."

"If you starve a slave, you'll get no work out of him."

And work was essential. For its sake villeins, cattle, and thralls were treated handsomely. The people bore the prince no grudge, for they had nowhere else to go. However far afield the simple may travel, they will never become princes, noblemen, or merchants. There is but one path for them—the path into eternal life, into the Kingdom of God. However sweet life may be beyond the grave, life on earth is sweeter.

To live is to reap. Or if not to reap, to strip hemp. Or if not to strip hemp, to full cloth. God has commanded man to eat bread in the sweat of his brow. Jesus of the Orthodox Church, Allah of the Mohammedans, the gods of the Mongols and heathens, have all agreed on one thing—man must labour on earth and ask no recompense. After death his reward will be meted out to him. Life must be lived in humility. Pride will not raise you to God. Meekness appeases the prince; flattery charms the nobleman; obligingness is agreeable to the steward.

Perched high above the river hangs the town of Dmitri, Prince of Moscow. In this town dwell people speaking different tongues and of various facial types, gathered together higgledy-piggledy from distant lands. Men and women captured in battle with the Polotski, the Bulgars, the Cheremiss, brought back from campaigns against Latvia, the Poles, and among the mountains. Prisoners carried off by the Tatars from Russian towns, from Persia, from Circassia, from Abazia, and later bought from the Tatars by the princes of Moscow. Those who had been bought were called "hordesmen", for they had been ransomed from the Tatar Horde. Some had passed through the hands of numerous conquerors and had had their fill of blood and battle. They had been shuffled about from Mordvas to Tatars, from Tatars to the princes of Ryazan, thence to the princes of Vladimir, and finally to the prince of Moscow. Long were the paths trudged by most of them. Now these paths were firmly trodden down among the low cottages suspended above the river. No marauder ever had a chance of taking the prisoners-of-war and hordesmen away from Dmitri of Moscow.

Dmitri was kindly disposed. He observed the Sunday rest, distributing food and demanding no work that day. On the twelve feast-days he doled out extra rations, for he remembered what Scripture admonished: "Blessed is the man who sheweth mercy even to cattle."

He proved lenient to his bondmen; and his bondwomen he never touched, for he was faithful to his Evdokia. These were unwonted virtues in a warrior and a prince.

When a steward died, another was sent to Ruza from Moscow to take his place and care for the prince's household. If there were any who neglected their duties about the place, or were cruel, self-seeking, and adulterous, the man from Moscow dismissed them.

"When a groom does not tend the master's horse and curry it properly, he will be thrashed so that in future he shall carry out his task assiduously."

"When a horse is not fed, it cannot drag the cart-wheels out of a rut. 'Tis not the horse but the groom who must be punished so that the beast shall be given the fodder it needs."

"When three teats of a fat cow are milked in succession and the fourth grows flabby, 'tis not the cow should be beaten but the milkmaid, so that milk shall flow to the prince's table from all the teats of the udder."

Such were the sayings of Punia, who came from Dmitri of Moscow, as he belaboured the sacked overseers for the edification of those he had newly appointed.

Punia was severe with overseers, hordesmen, and menials. He was exacting but lenient. Dmitri Ivanovich was a good master.

The people slept on the cottage floor with felt matting beneath them. Better to sleep low down, for up above smoke and charcoal fumes were asphyxiating, whereas on the ground the air was purer. They ate in a dining-hall at tables, and not on the floor, as had been the custom in former settlements of captives. There was a bowl for six, which was also a generous arrangement. No brawling took place. A spoon apiece was allotted. Cabbage soup was no longer lapped out of the palm of the hand. Bread was given in abundance. When need arose, a recalcitrant would be whipped—not till he became unconscious, but until he could bear no more. Craftsmen were especially well treated. Old folk were set to the lighter tasks.

"When a villein has the strength to lift five measures, he will lift them over and over again. If he lifts six measures, he may get a rupture and will not then be able to lift so much as six handfuls," Punia would declare. Or again: "The white loaves of the Prince of Moscow are a relish. If you eat one, your stomach will crave for another. The mead at the Prince's board is golden and very heady. I have grown strong on this fare, but it would undermine the strength of a villein."

During many years of zealous supervision, Punia had seen a number of the Grand Prince's villages. But he held his peace, and did not tell how lightly the Prince handled the sword, his own sword which he had not forged himself. Neither did the Prince tend the bees whose store of honey went to the making of his golden mead. Nor did he sow or reap or grind the corn for his white wheaten loaves. He drove not his herds to pasture nor sheared his sheep nor fulled the textiles used for felt matting and saddle-cloths. The designs for his charger's trappings were invented by other minds and the silver ornaments on his saddle were chased by alien hands. Having satiated his hunger and thirst, he would vault into the saddle, lash his mount with a silken thong, and gallop away into the freedom of the open road to win glory for himself and match his blade against that of an enemy. A prince's business in life was battle. That of his men was toil. Victorious battles were rewarded with captured men and women. Human beings were the fruits of princely labour. For this the Prince left his golden vaulted chambers, his loving wife, his large-eyed children, his succulent food and strong drink. For this he endured the hardships of campaigns, the wounds of battle. Victory brought wealth; defeat brought ruin. Dmitri was weary of the burden of dishonour, and the yoke the Horde imposed was disastrous. But Punia, though his tongue wagged freely in the dining-hall, guided the conversation away from such topics so that vain thoughts might not visit men while they sat at board.

Punia seated himself in the Grand Prince's dilapidated chamber overlooking the forest stream. Timber floated down the river. When the timber reached the confluence it would speed onward down the waters to Moscow. Sodden, blackened logs drifted by. Once they had stood in the thick forests, their leaves rustling in the wind. Birds built their nests among the branches, sang, and reared their nestlings. But the young birds nurtured in these trees had been left far behind and the lop and top had been abandoned to rot in the silent glades. Autumn would find these logs at the Kremlin. They would be drawn out of the water with grappling-irons and hauled on to the banks to dry. When seasoned they would serve for the building of houses and mansions and thus gradually form a town. Under the roofs, peasant women would love their husbands and bear villeins until fire consumed the dwellings, which would go up in smoke-wreaths to the heavens to disperse in the distance.

As the rafts were carried downwards on the current, the men sang, unaware that the Grand Prince's overseer hearkened to the lilt.

Punia never hindered anyone from singing, for he knew that song makes work all the lighter. Songs in many tongues could be heard on the Prince's estates. Captives of various races made their homes in the cottages and laboured. The smell of oaten bread and cabbage soup was wafted from the dining-hall. Punia did not turn up his nose at the common people's food. At high noon he strode to the dining-table and took his seat beneath the ikon. Then the overseers grew discreetly quiet, and the servingmen ate in strict silence. If Punia thought fit to talk, nobody interrupted him. One only, a sometime monk, Kyrill by name, though unfrocked, occasionally ventured to express dissent in a low tone of voice. Let each go his own way, thought Punia, and so long as no harm was done to others he was not the man to interfere. But he invariably found an apt answer to Kyrill's interpolations.

Kyrill was huge, hirsute, and dirty. Formerly he had been devout. He still frequently crossed himself before and after meals and was well versed in Holy Writ. But sin had deprived him of his monastic orders and had cast him into bondage. Punia had not forgotten what had been recorded to Kyrill's discredit.

"He was a monk of the Chudov monastery but fell from grace. As penance, he was sent to repent his sins in the Golutvin cloister at Kolomna. But even there he failed to observe his vow of chastity. For this he was unfrocked by the abbot and handed over to the Prince of Moscow, who transferred him to Ruza. On account of his strength he was made an overseer. He was not ill-natured but negligent. He demanded little from lazy villeins, and for this was called to account. He was then put to hard labour and had to sweep up the dirt in the yard."

Punia had been keeping a watchful eye on him for some time. Kyrill was a strange fellow. Of late he had formed a friendship with the Mussulman Alis—a Persian from Shemakha. He did not understand the Orthodox faith, nor could he speak the Russian language, but talked to Kyrill in Greek. The significance of the words escaped Punia, for he had not been taught the wisdom of the Greeks. Yet it was clear to him that these two men were on friendly terms. At Christmas Kyrill and Alis sat in the frost beneath John's tower. Before Epiphany they had a bath together and briskly whipped one another with juniper branches. On Good Friday Kyrill did not ask to go to the Church of the Lord, but stood with Alis to watch the ice drifting down the river. During the Yuletide festivities he beat the tambourine as though he had taken strong drink, while Alis sang a song in a heathen tongue. All these doings were a puzzle to Punia and worth noting. What was Alis really like? Had Punia the right, he would sell this hordesman, for his body was frail, his skin yellow, and his face meditative. What business had a thrall to think after eating his fill? Moreover, Alis was feeble-minded.

On feast days Alis would sit apart from the others on the bare earth. He muttered something which was incomprehensible to Punia, picked earth up with his fingers, smiled to himself, frowned, hurriedly destroyed the hillocks and furrows he had built on the ground, then remodelled them and grinned. If he were in populous Moscow, and were Orthodox and pious, the Muscovites would revere him as a "holy fool". Peasant women would come to ask counsel about ruptures and barrenness. Young girls would accost him in whispers and implore him to give them herbs for the brewing of simples to allure their sweet-hearts. Soldiers would ask for a charm against arrows, or inquire as to the

outcome of a campaign. But who in Ruza wanted a Shemakhan like this?

Kyrill's friendship began on a day when Alis was sitting on the sandy ground. Everyone else was trying to make up arrears in their weekly tasks. Some were patching trousers, others were bent over the washing of clothes, others slept, others stitched shoes. Although they were of different races and spoke different tongues, work drew all these people together and made them comprehensible to one another. The day before, Kyrill had been degraded from his post as overseer and put to watching the yard. He noticed that while everyone else was busy, the puny Shemakhan sat aloof gazing at the ground, anon smiling, then becoming preoccupied and fumbling in the sand. He behaved like a child. But his hair showed him to be elderly, the grey strands gleaming in the shadows. Was he mad? Kyrill stamped with his monastic heel on the pagan devices in the sand. Then, as if he had trodden on a living body, he heard something resembling a sob, followed by vivid and offensive curses. Kyrill looked round and stood rooted to the spot. The like of this he had never seen before. The man stood there as one dead, his head not reaching to Kyrill's shoulder. By a twist of his hand Kyrill could have crumpled the little creature up, yet here he was abusing him fearlessly. Perhaps he imagined that Kyrill did not understand Greek curses.

"Don't blaspheme against someone stronger than yourself. I understand every word you say," said Kyrill aloud.

"But I hold you in contempt, savage!"

"It is unbecoming in a slave to feel contempt," answered Kyrill.

"You are an abomination," said the Shemakhan.

"I believe in one God, the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth. You have grown up in darkness like a worm. What have you to be proud of, idiot?"

"I know your God, and I have come to know many other gods. Your God condemns slavery. Yet we are both slaves to the servant of this God of yours. Your God——"

"Hold your peace! Hold your peace, cursed infidel! Don't try to pervert my soul and besmirch my faith. Lord, give me strength not to slay this blasphemer!"

Kyrill shunned the temptation. While at work, he found no time to look about him. Besides, he and Alis laboured in different places. But again Kyrill saw Alis, and again the man was sitting on the sand. That day they were the only two who were not washing or patching or stitching. They regarded such occupations with disdain.

"Why do you sit in the dust like a holy fool?" asked Kyrill. "Is that what you are? Won't you foretell me my future?"

"I am neither a magician nor a holy fool. I know not the future. I have no present. I have torn up my past by the roots. I have sojourned in many towns and among many peoples. I used to build houses of stone, and walls too, and the turrets of fortresses. I have been brought to a land where they know not how to lay stone upon stone, and where they prefer wood to durable masonry. And here am I doomed to model my designs in clay and sand. Anyone may set his foot on them. If I do not conceal the pain I feel, I am punished. Such is my life."

"Are you a Greek?" asked Kyrill thoughtfully.

"No, a Persian. But for twelve years I built in Constantinople. Thence I was tempted to cast my eyes on the great Bulgar city. But my road was cut by battles, and with a crowd of others I was bought by the Prince of Moscow as a

prisoner of the Horde. This is the tenth year in which I drag out my life as a slave. You are a slave in your own land, and that is an even more bitter lot."

"I am here, brother, for violating a wanton."

"I do not understand."

"I was a monk. I took the habit in order to escape the earthly burdens of life and its many cares. I could not endure the injustice of the cellarer in my monastery, so I took him to the privy and threw him into the cess-pit. The abbot got rid of me by sending me to the newly-built Golutvin monastery. Not far from there is a settlement. A wanton wench aroused my lust, and hoped to squeeze money out of me. Possessing no such wealth, I knocked her down, belayed her with my leather belt, and—loved her. When, having had my will of her, I still gave her no money, she denounced me publicly. So here I am, talking to you. I was born in Zariad, and in my youth some merchants took me to Constantinople. They came utterly to ruin, and left me there. I grew to manhood in the Studian monastery, making my living as a mason, until Metropolitan Alexis took me back to Russia to act as one of his servitors. That is why I speak Greek. Maybe both you and I were on the same job of building, and then drifted apart. The paths of men wind like living serpents. Now ours have crossed again."

Such meetings grew more frequent. Kyrill came to understand every hillock of sand piled up by Alis on the ground, and every lump of clay fashioned by his fingers. He would even dilate upon other matters, and Alis heeded his words.

Once Kyrill said:

"It is written that when the tower of Babel was being built, God confused the tongues of the builders so that they ceased to understand one another. Hence arose the differences in human languages. This is beyond me to fathom. Of one thing I am certain. Here in Ruza, agreement and understanding exist between persons of different races. The building of a tower or other joint work unites people. It does not separate them."

"I do not find any truth in your scriptures," answered Alis. "It is said that God sees everything, knows everything. Each life is known to Him beforehand. And again it is said that man is sent into the world to live his life in righteousness. If God sees all our acts before we perform them, why are we put to the test? Our wise man Khayyám sang: 'When God formed my body of corruptible clay, He put strong passions into me but did not give me the power to fight against them. Why dost thou threaten me with hell if thou thyself, O God, hast been at fault?'"

Such was the substance of their conversations. Punia noticed that Kyrill no longer performed the Orthodox rites as zealously as had been his wont. He was taking part in Alis's building in the sand. This made Punia uneasy.

One spring day Kyrill was summoned to Punia's presence. The latter was standing in the tower, high above the river. From this vantage-point could be seen the place where the river swirled round a bend. The ice had broken and moved slowly along, piling up in the distance, but turning easily here below the town.

"Your esteem for the Greek tongue," said Punia, "astonishes me. It is a language for birds, for chattering starlings."

But Kyrill cruelly put Punia to shame.

"In Constantinople divine service is celebrated in Greek. It is the language of the Fathers of the Church and not of starlings."

"You are impertinent. But your stupidity and lechery are known to God. He is your judge. What do you see in the Shemakhan's sand-madness?"

"It is not madness, sir, but profound thought. He was trained to build towns of stone, and now he tries to build their likeness in the sand."

Thus Punia learned that Alis was an architect. He wrote to Moscow: "On the Prince's estate is a hordesman, Alis by name, born in Shemakha. He is highly skilled in architecture. At present he is occupied as a fuller but is weary of the job. Since we have heard that the Grand Prince Dmitri Ivanovich is seeking architects and men of all trades, we are writing to you to call your attention to this man Alis."

One road to Moscow from Ruza was by river. It was slow but sure. A speedier route ran through the forest. Punia's letter was borne by boat, but the answer from Moscow winged its way through the forest. Likewise through the forest Alis set forth on his journey from Ruza to Moscow, and with him went the mason Kyrill. They were brought to the Kremlin.

In the Kremlin Alis saw the thick log walls of the Prince's chambers, the corners of which were joined by iron clamps. The windows, wandering over the walls like horses in a field, were adorned with carved jambs painted in a variety of colours. Alis looked up at the gilded ceiling in the corners of which lions and masks of wrought iron raised their heads. The spiral pillars of staircases and passages caught his eye. Alis was not impressed, for the whole thing seemed to him nothing better than a heap of bedaubed wood thrown hastily into the back yard.

The guards and pages were greatly puzzled as to what to do about Alis's clothing, which was roughly made and ill-fitting. Alis chose a plain linen shirt. It swathed him closely and its length made him appear even more diminutive in stature. Over this he donned a pink damask tunic resembling a Shernakhan kaftan. Then he sat down to await Dmitri's pleasure. Meanwhile, Kyrill had found an inn and a goodly company, with whom he got into conversation.

"Are there many stone churches in Moscow? Are there many widows or maids of marriageable age? And where do such wenches live?"

It was not sin which roused his excitement, but his new position. For many years he had been a monk, and the thoughts and sorrows of the world without the monastery walls had been denied him. Now he was no longer a monk and there were none to remember that he had been unfrocked. He had become one of the Prince's masons, the equal of other bondmen, with the right to take a bondwoman to wife. A woman of property, were she willing to marry a slave, was not beyond his powers to attain—though should he wed her she would become a thrall herself. Kyrill's tongue was loosened by the reflection that he could converse with married folk as a man whose status would open a path to a family.

Meanwhile, in the servants' hall an ancient overseer, sucking his toothless gums, blinked with disapproval at Alis.

"A slave is awaiting the Prince's summons. He may have to wait a day or a week. It's not right. You are an architect, slave. Go and find the master of court affairs. It is not seemly for a slave to deck himself in a coloured coat. It is not seemly that the Prince should receive a slave as though he were a distinguished foreigner. Under Dmitri many things are done which were not considered seemly under Simeon Ivanich the Proud, under Ivan Ivanich, nor, above all, under the Grand Prince Ivan Danilich, under Kalita."

But Alis sat patient and silent. No one here understood Greek. Persian was slipping from his memory. In Ruza there had been more people to talk to. Besides, had he not conversed with the Emperor of Byzantium? But the Emperor in Constantinople had had a real house with which this wooden barrack

of a place was not to be compared. Further, the Emperor would not have countenanced such a decrepit old scarecrow in a mangy fur coat to be included among his household. Yet here a man of this ilk had been made steward and was posted in this hall to keep order.

At this moment a page, after scurrying up and down many staircases and corridors, rushed in to say that the Grand Prince was awaiting the bondman.

Chapter III

DMITRI'S COURT AND HOUSEHOLD

DMITRI SAT ON A PLAIN BENCH NEAR THE WINDOW IN THE COUNCIL CHAMBER leaning on the sill. A mounted guardsman rode by. His horsemanship was beyond reproach. Obviously he had been well trained, though it had cost no little labour to teach such as he. Tatars had been engaged to enlist hordesmen in the cavalry in order to impart their knowledge to the Russians. No longer was the army what it had been in Dmitri's youth when he led it against Dmitri of Suzdal. Then the men had fought with their hearts, knowing naught of the ways of battle. In those days they went to it with a will and mustered quickly. But now they had learned how to fight, and the weapons were not home-made as of yore, when at times they had armed themselves with axes fixed to poles. A fine sort of spear!

Brenko, Bobrok, and Vladimir Andreich were conversing in low tones. A savoury smell of baking pies rose to the Council Chamber from the kitchen. "It is time to be eating," thought Dmitri. He was fond of food.

Dmitri sat apart at the window. Alis knelt before he came up to the Prince. Dmitri said:

"I am told that you have been taught to build stone houses."

Without approaching the pair, Bobrok translated the Prince's words into Greek. Dmitri spoke only Russian. In Greek he knew a few prayers which he had learned by heart. Alis, inclining his head and with his hand on his heart, answered:

"I have built many of them, Lord Dmitri Ivanovich."

"Why have you concealed this?"

"I did not conceal it, my lord, but such houses are not built in Russia. Here they make shift with wood alone—and I do not know how to build with wood."

"Wood shelters us. We love and revere it. But the time has come to think in terms of stone. If you are a skilful architect, you will give me cause to rejoice. If you are a poor one, beware! I shall send you back to Ruza or away to Mozhai. There my estate is larger than in Ruza. Recently, I sent a detachment of Tatars there, and the Tatars are vigilant and more exacting in their demands."

"I shall heed your words, my lord."

"A shooting-turret must be built in the Kremlin. Others there are, but they have been badly constructed and need alteration. The one I confide to your care must be skilfully devised above a secret passage. The way to the water and to the cellars is there. Can you undertake it?"

"I have built towers, my lord. The view from them opened on to the broad

expanses of the sea. I have dug underground passages. They defend Constantinople to this day. The earth is wider if there are paths within it. This I know."

Dmitri dismissed Alis, sending him straightway to the Master of the Court. Rynda accompanied him. None but the three intimates of Dmitri heard his conversation with Alis.

"You, Dmitri Mihailovich, must question him later. Find out what sort of pillars he erected in Constantinople. Do they answer the needs of war? What else can the man do? And his men must be composed of deaf-mutes. Do you understand me?"

"The idea had already occurred to me."

"Nor must he himself clothe his thoughts in words. Some Tatars understand Greek—and not in Moscow alone!"

"Your orders shall be carried out, Dmitri Ivanovich."

"Do you know, Mihail Andreich, what sort of draughtsmen have just been engaged to paint the walls of the Chudov monastery?"

"They are wonderful, Prince. They touch the walls not with a brush, but, as it were, with thought itself."

"And they are not Greeks?"

"As I have said before, what need have we of Greeks when our own countrymen do so well? Did Zaharei and his men paint the Cathedral of the Archangel worse than the Greeks? And now the Muscovites are going to show their mettle at Chudov!"

"There is a rumour that in Novgorod the Greek, Theophan, is working on the Church of the Transfiguration," said Dmitri. "He has been highly praised."

"I have heard," Brenko interpolated, "that he painted the Church of Theodor the Warrior. He wields his brush easily. He does not confuse feature with feature, and his images seem to float in the air or are fragrant with the fumes of incense, so ethereal are they."

"Him, likewise, we must allure to Moscow. The best from all over Russia must be brought to Moscow."

"We shall allure him, Dmitri Ivanovich."

A page came at this moment from the Princess to summon them to dinner. Though so tall and heavy, Dmitri leaped to his feet like the flash of a wing.

"It is time," he exclaimed.

They set off, taking the passages which led to the dining-hall. Tortuous paths were dear to the Prince's heart. The tables were set out simply in rows, and the utensils were of painted wood, both for the salted and pickled fare. There were no strangers at the board, so the Princess had come to partake of the midday meal with her husband. Brenko was the only one who was not a relative, but, seeing him every day with her husband, she regarded him as one of the family. He had grown up side by side with Dmitri.

They were served by pages, barefooted, but wearing white shirts reaching to their knees, and white breeches. In summer-time there seemed no point in stamping about in boots.

A basin was presented to each of the five, water was poured over their hands from a jug which was the work of the Horde. They were handed a towel embroidered with red peahens. The stitching arrested Brenko's attention.

"The women of Suzdal are skilled in needlework such as this."

Dmitri turned to him, and inquired:

"You, I see, have come to know the work wrought by women's hands throughout Russia?"

And suddenly, blushing deeply, he glanced round at Evdokia. But she was regaling Bobrok and paying no heed to the conversation.

"You are right as regards Suzdal. This is a towel belonging to Evdokia. It came from there."

"It is very fine weather today," observed Vladimir.

"And it would be pleasant to amuse oneself on a day like this," replied Brenko. "The air is mild, the wind light. It would be good to catch an elk in the forest and to stretch one's limbs."

"Your idea is to fill your stomach by hunting with the Prince," laughed Dmitri.

"I should go beyond Kudrin. There are fine woods there."

"No elks like those at Setun are to be found in the vicinity of Moscow," said Bobrok. "You cannot see the stream, but venison abounds. The other day some shepherds saw two does the like of which have never been seen. Horns like the aurochs', legs like a deer's. And deer from Sweden come there—grey ones."

"Father Sergei said that last year a sounder of boar stampeded into the Troitsa monastery. The blessed Sergei drove them out of the kitchen garden with his staff. He told me they had trampled the cabbage crop to a pulp," observed Evdokia.

Bobrok said:

"Fancy wasting the flesh of wild boar as if it were a dog's! I am not impressed."

"I have heard, Dmitri Mihailovich," said Evdokia reproachfully, "that you eat smoked bear's ham. I dislike such game."

"It tastes like pork, though the fat is of a heavier consistency. I admit that I became accustomed to it in Volhynia, Evdokia Dmitrievna."

Said Vladimir Andreich:

"I gather that Oleg Ivanovich got to enjoy eating horseflesh among the Tatars in Ryazan. Even Metropolitan Alexei questioned him about it."

"Ugh!" Evdokia exclaimed, shuddering. "And what did he answer His Grace?"

"'During my stay with the Horde,' he said, 'I became truly pagan. But in Ryazan I have become clean again.'"

"He's a good liar—but his demands are modest," observed Dmitri.

"One who lives among wolves will howl with the wolves," answered Brenko.

"And who forces him to live among wolves?" inquired Bobrok. "We are nearer to Ryazan than the Horde."

Evdokia was pleased when Bobrok spoke at her table. His gentle voice seemed to combine strength with tenderness. Also, she thought that he was restraining not only his voice but some other power.

"It is difficult to come to an agreement with Oleg," Brenko remarked. "When he speaks he looks you in the eyes. But when you look at him again the wind has veered and Oleg has turned the other way."

"I do not blame him," said Dmitri. "When you come to think of it, the Tatars may fall upon him at any moment, burn his villages, destroy his estates, and trample over his whole principedom. No, I cannot blame him."

"You are wonderfully peace-loving, Dmitri. You are glad to give every robber ten kopecks."

To which Dmitri replied:

"In his heart of hearts, Oleg is always with us. But before thinking of himself he must feed his land."

And Brenko:

"Indeed, Ryazan has suffered much. In all Russia there is no town where so great a quantity of Russian blood has soaked the earth. Nowadays the young people have begun to forget that. But a time may come when they will remember."

"The amazing part of the whole business," interposed Bobrok, "is the number of Oleg's own family who have been maltreated by the Tatars. Yet he mixes with them."

"Perhaps he is biding his time," suggested the Princess.

"A prince is not a nun, Evdokia Dmitrievna. He must not bide, but must forge his time—as my cousin and I forge it," Vladimir answered her.

Dmitri touched his friend's hand. "Thank you, Vladimir."

The pages served them noiselessly, gathered up the bones from the table, changed the dishes.

Dmitri ate heartily and with concentration, but drank sparingly. The others, including Evdokia, drank their fill of mead. A comforting glow permeated the body, and their eyes sparkled with merriment.

Evdokia, glancing casually out of the window, exclaimed:

"Look there!"

The street was swollen with the spring damp and recent rains. The people made their way along narrow wooden footways set close against the walls. On the bridge stood the Tatar, Burkhan. Everybody knew him. His father had been a tax-gatherer in Suzdal, collecting tribute for the khan. Not the Prince of Suzdal, but the Mongol tax-gatherer, had been master in Suzdal. When Ivan Kalita journeyed to the Horde and persuaded the khan to give him the right to collect tribute for the Horde, there remained nothing more for the tax-gatherer to do in Russian towns. So he left Suzdal. But the secular and commercial life of Moscow suited him. Here the wares of the Horde were in demand, and business affairs are never uncongenial to a tax-gatherer. When the father died, his son, this same Burkhan, curried favour with Mamai and came to Moscow to transact his business. For five years now he had been here trading and spying out the land. To his father's insolence he added the arrogance of the merchant. He had faithful friends in the Horde, and the Muscovites were bound to respect a prince of the Horde.

The Tatar stood on the bridge and stared at the city. The spring sun was warm. His gown, woven of many colours like a carpet, shone in the rays. His rose-hued turban, twisted into rich folds, surmounted the murza's face like a dome. His green morocco boots proudly cupped their pointed noses. Burkhan's mien was solemn as he stood there gazing, not at the damp earth, but at the peaked roofs of the houses and the gilded cupolas of the churches. He was toying with a thick whip, and was thinking it was about time to order the crosses on the spires of the churches to be replaced by Moslem crescents. The people went past, but before they reached the Tatar they stepped off the wooden sidewalks and at once sank to their ankles in mud. They squelched along, bowing to the wide-mawed Burkhan. Only after making a detour did they climb back on to the wooden footways again.

Dmitri beckoned to Brenko, saying:

"Just look at that!"

"Wait a bit," answered Brenko. He whispered to a page: "Go to the kitchen and see if Grisha Kapustin is there. He's our man . . ."

The page slipped away as on winged feet, tearing down the passages. The befuddled Brenko had not returned from the door to rejoin Dmitri ere the lad was back. He caught the page in the doorway.

"Well, boy?"

"Shall I bring him in here, Mihail Andreich?"

"Where is he?"

"On the staircase."

"I shall go myself."

Brenko went out and saw a young fellow a good head taller than himself with shoulders as broad as the stairway. Inclining his head with its low brow, Grisha looked at the boyar from beneath his fringe of flaxen hair. The young man's beard curled softly; he smiled sweetly at Brenko.

"Grisha, what were you doing in the kitchen?"

"I was looking after the mead, Mihail Andreich."

"Did you touch it?"

"Well, I just sucked a little, like milk from my mother's breast."

"Are you strong?"

"Strength does not weaken with a drop of liquor."

"Below, on the footbridge, Burkhan is deliberately blocking the way. Go down and push past him."

"And what if I fall over him?"

"Go—go!"

"See to it that I don't get into trouble afterwards."

"God forbid!"

Brenko turned on his heel, and when he reached the table he took mead in a ladle and blew off a bee's wing. But a golden hop-leaf floated up from the bottom. Again Brenko blew. Dmitri, Evdokia, and the intoxicated guests bent over the window-sill. Grisha passed through the yard and crossed the street a good way off.

With hands outspread, on heavy, ungainly legs, he made his way leisurely along the footbridge towards the Tatar.

But the murza enjoyed looking at the town, and the esteem of the passers-by was a delight to him. When he saw Grisha in the distance he glanced askance at him and at once turned away. It was not for a murza to yield ground to anyone.

"Hullo, there!" cried Grisha.

"What about 'hullo, there'?" said the murza, glaring at the lad with disapproval.

"Make way."

"What's that you say?"

"Let me pass."

Burkhan lost his temper.

"Who are you to address me in such a fashion? Have you taken leave of your senses, thrall?"

"Whose thrall?"

"Go round," was all the Tatar deigned to reply.

Grisha gently thrust the man aside. Burkhan's turban unwound itself like a snake, the Tatar lost his balance, toppled over, and rolled into the mire in the middle of the roadway: The tax-gatherer had no time to recall the appropriate Russian epithets for such an occasion before Grisha was on him. He wrenched the whip from the murza's hand, seated himself on his opponent's neck, and, holding him by the ears, thrust his face into the good slime of the street. Then the youth rose, flourished the whip, and brought it down on that part of the Tatar where a blow is not mortal, but the force of which cut his coat.

Grisha brushed the mud from his knees, jumped on to the footway, and made tracks for the outskirts of the town.

The murza had not spat the mud from his mouth or wiped it from his eyes, nor had he been able to ascertain whether he would ever be fit to bestride a horse again before the overseers from the Grand Prince's apartments had rushed to the rescue of the guest from the Horde and helped him to his feet.

"Little father Burkhan Agureevich, how the devil did you fall like this? The Prince will hear of it, you may be sure, and he will be deeply grieved."

But Burkhan merely spat. The men took the guest by the arms and with apparent sympathy wiped the mud from his face, watching the while for an opportunity to rub it in the harder. They escorted him to his home, but before he had had time to so much as change his coat a boyar arrived post-haste from Dmitri, saying:

"The Prince is most anxious to learn how you are, Burkhan Agureevich."

While Burkhan was ruminating what answer to give the boyar, the latter had opened a small silken packet and taken out a ring of twisted silver set with a turquoise.

The boyar's voice was loud and sombre as he declared:

"Dmitri Ivanovich, lord and prince of all Russia, honours you with the gift of this jewel."

He handed the ring to Burkhan with a bow, adding sweetly:

"As a memento."

Evdokia went into the courtyard to see whether the clothes chests were drying out nicely. Coats, furs, fabrics and brocade dresses, men's coats of brocade and velvet, sarafans, which had been laid away in the presses, and those to be put away for the summer, were hanging out to air in the glorious sunshine. The fabrics had been collected from German and Frankish weavers, from Byzantine craftsmen in Constantinople. Silks had come from the Horde and from Persia. Furs had been brought by the trappers in the dark forest belt. Everything was dancing in the light spring breeze. Only the beaver skins were airing in the shade so that they might not go yellow in the sun. The faint, sharp smell of pepper and laurel leaves clung to the nostrils. These herbs were destined to be placed among the garments when they were packed away so as to preserve them from moth.

The chests were painted and held together by ornamental clamps and latticed ironwork. They stood in the middle of the yard, their scarlet and white maws wide open. Evdokia whiled away the time with her warm treasures spread around her. The starlings whistled and chattered from the tree-tops. The effect of the mead was gradually wearing off. Her sons, Vasili and Yuri, were playing noisily on the damp ground, into which they had stuck little sticks, at which they aimed with their bows and arrows. Their nurse prodded a splinter bound with a pink ribbon in the earth, saying:

"Now, little Prince, shoot the Tatar Burkhan!"

Evdokia turned on the woman sharply.

"What's the idea?" she inquired, casting such a look in the nurse's direction that the woman hurriedly snatched the splinter from beneath the arrow and hid it in her sarafan.

"Oh, it isn't there, and never was!"

Three-year-old Yuri began to cry. Evdokia tenderly pressed his baby face against her knees. Vasili was six, but though Yuri was so much the younger he tried hard to keep pace with his elder brother, not wishing to be behind in anything. He hit the mark no worse than did Vasili. He was dark and swarthy like his father. But Evdokia preferred children to be sensitive, pink,

and fair, smelling of milk and honey. Yuri seemed a stranger to her, almost as though he were not her own child.

"He's the image of his father," she thought. The resemblance puzzled her. Vasil, the six-year-old, watched his mother with amazement as she fondled his screaming and angry brother.

Just at this moment Evdokia heard her cousin Aniuta, Prince Bobrok's wife, driving in from her excursion to the monastery. Brenko's wife, too, joined Evdokia in the courtyard. The women were interested in inspecting the Grand Princess's possessions.

"So you are airing your things, Princess Evdokia Dmitrievna?"

"That's what these warm spring days are meant for," said Evdokia.

Slowly Brenko's wife lowered her eyes. "Only for that?" she mused. "I wonder for what else besides."

"Furs are not the only things to get damaged by being laid away. Women, too——"

"Well," interrupted Evdokia, with a laugh, "your Mihail Andreich is not a man to allow that to happen to you!"

"But I do not like fair men. They spread themselves like dough or pea soup . . ."

Evdokia kept silent. She was fond of blond men, of Brenko, and Dmitri was aware of her preference.

"Let's go upstairs," she said. "Princess Anna is there. She has come to pick up her husband."

She preceded her guest with a light, resilient step, while Brenkova followed more leisurely, being plump and thick-set. The oak staircase took it out of her.

"My mead is a great success this winter. Won't you taste some?" asked Evdokia.

Labouring to regain her breath, Brenkova could scarcely stammer out how well her own brew had fermented.

" . . . With . . . fennel . . . aromatic and strong . . ."

"How did you brew it?"

"In the usual way."

The chamber was redolent of the fragrant smell of resin, herbs, and roots which were hung up in corners or stowed away behind the ikons. The women talked. Brenkova was full of gossip, but there was a frown on Anna's stern face. She disapproved such chatter, and Aniuta's stories fell flat. Evdokia called one of the maids.

"Have we no mummers in the palace?"

But Anna interrupted with:

"No, little Evdokia, it is time I went home."

"But Prince Dmitri Mihailovich is asleep upstairs. Do wait until he rouses up."

The girl said joyfully:

"Three men from Rostov have been kicking their heels downstairs since this morning. And Timosha is in the courtyard. He has brought a bear with him from Kolomna."

"How splendid! Do have the bear brought up here. And call the singers."

Playing and singing, the troupe mounted the stairs and bowed as they entered the room.

"To little mother Evdokia 'mitrievna may God grant happiness and beauty and a long life to your small and lovely boy. Strike up, Alesha."

The company sang and danced. The merry song kept measure with their

feet. Their bast shoes squeaked. The maids crowded in the doorway, nudging one another with their elbows. The eldest player, his hands wide apart, stood in the centre of the room and began to sing:

"Glorious are the warriors of Kiev,
Glorious are the bells in the town of Moscow,
Sweet are the kisses in Kolomna,
Wide are the skirts of Ryazan,
Lovable are the sarafans in Suzdal,
Very dear are the maidens of Beloe,
White-bellied are the widows of Lithuania . . ."

The song ceased abruptly and the singer bowed low. His mates followed suit. Still flushed with sleep, but attentive to the music, Prince Bobrok stood in the doorway.

"Can you sing many topical ballads?"

"Ay, that I can, my lord."

"Away with you then to the scribes and learn a new one which they have just written fair."

The elder player was on the point of making a dive for the door to collect the new script when Bobrok halted him, saying:

"Not yet. First amuse the Princesses."

Once again the mummers set about humming and dancing. The pipes started to chaunt furiously, and Bobrok, when he had had enough of their drone, took his departure.

The songs died away. The women went off to vespers. The troupe sat on a broad bench in the yard while a scribe began to read the broadsheet aloud to them:

"Shalt kick the doors apart without a sign of pity,
To doff thine helmet thou shalt have no call . . ."

The eldest player held up a threatening finger, interrupting the scribe.

"Wait a bit, wait a bit!" he cried. "What does this mean? Is it the Tatar sending an ambassador to Vladimir and having him punished . . . ?"

"Shalt kick the doors apart without a sign of pity . . ."

"I understand. 'Do not bow,' says he, 'to the Russian prince.' I've to apply it to myself."

Both scribe and singer were by this time extremely agitated and full of fear lest they made a mistake. The scribe, especially, doubted whether the singer might not misunderstand the allegorical allusions. The men began to quarrel about the song, and the scribe questioned the singer dubiously.

"Are you quite sure you have understood? It should be sung in such a way as to make the fur fly from off the Tatars."

"As it flew off Burkhan today . . ."

"Sh . . . !" The scribe looked at him in alarm. "Only Burkhan knows about that. No one saw anything, no one heard . . ."

"But how will you stop rumour?" asked the younger man.

"Let rumour take its own course. It will go where it is meant to go."

When the whole allegory had been committed to memory from paper, the eldest player began to intone it. An ancient melody came to life, was imbued with new meaning. The singer grew excited. For the first time in his life,

though only by way of song, he was beating the Tatars. He bore his fresh acquisition to the populace in the streets of Moscow.

And Bobruk stood behind Dmitri in the chapel of the monastery of Our Saviour, attending evensong. He muttered something to himself, something quite alien from the peaceful flow of prayers.

Chapter IV

THE KREMLIN

THE TURRET WAS BUILT QUICKLY. IN THOSE DAYS MEN KNEW HOW TO SPEED THE work. Many of the wooden churches were called "one-day churches". This meant that they had been erected, completed, and consecrated in a single day. Such was the spirit of Russian carpenters. St. Michael's Church had taken a year to build, and this was thought to be a very long time. But it was constructed of stone. The chapel of St. Michael in the Chudov monastery had also taken a year to build, and it, too, was of stone. Such were the Russian stonemasons. God had all eternity to wait, but would the enemies of Russia await the completion of the walls that were to defend Moscow? It was therefore determined to finish off the new turret within one hundred days.

Alongside the walls, opposite the secret passage, a wooden barrack had been botched up wherein the masons were expected to lodge. The place was cramped and dark. The ceiling was so low that the labourers' heads all but touched it, and Kyrill's actually did. Windows were considered unnecessary. "It is not a chamber," so the masters said, "but a servants' room."

The door was kept permanently open to let out the stench. The food was poor. Either Moscow was thrifty or the boyar in charge was a stingy fellow.

But Alis seemed unaware of the murk of the foul dwelling, or of the weakness of his underlings, or of Kyrill's gloomy countenance. His thoughts transcended the masonry and soared into the grey skies which hung over Moscow.

The Kremlin was all about them with its closely packed buildings and its green gardens and courtyards. The pine forest, which trespassed as far as the Borovitski gate, had been thinned out, yet twilight still lingered in its depths. The Church of Our Saviour was as solid as a stout woman, and its gilded cupola was silhouetted against the heavens like a warrior's helmet. Chudov, made entirely of wood, was approaching completion. The monastery held a special place in Dmitri's heart, for he revered it as the last resting-place of his teacher Alexei. The Cathedral of the Archangel also reared its head proudly above the other structures. Everything in its precincts was squat and built of timber. The beauty of the Kremlin escaped Alis's powers of appreciation, though the Russians relished it. He would have preferred the plain solidity of stone walls rising tier upon tier; he would have had them decorated modestly with a spiral design so that each twist of the spiral would have jutted out clearly from the stonework like a lizard on the sand of the desert. The stone was of good quality, some yellowish in tint and the remainder of a roseate hue. Moscow possessed not only a wealth of forest-land but had superb resources of stone. The one thing lacking was men for labour.

"You are gloomy and unkempt, Kyrill. What makes you so sad? We are

again building as we did in Constantinople, firmly, as though we were manipulating granite. Our workmen are intelligent. We have decided not to alter our plans, and we shall build according to our own ideas. What more can a man want?"

"That, Alis, to which you are blind. Look, we are building a watch-tower to protect us against battles, against the foe. Yet we are surrounded and shut in. I wanted to take a stroll through Moscow, but was turned back. I wanted to pass the time of day with an acquaintance below the wall, but I was ordered to come down. I wanted to go to church and have a glimpse of the women praying, but the overseer's bloodshot eye squinted down at his sword and he told me to worship God at home. I'm just suffocating."

"Fix your thoughts on the architecture. Think of the tower. Talk to it. See how it grows. We are not slaves, but are only being speeded up. An architect cannot be transformed into a slave so long as he is provided with cement and stone and given the right to build according to his vision."

"But I cannot see visions so long as I am under the lash. That is why I am sad now. Do not judge me wrong, for I am very sad."

And he added in a whisper:

"Sad and extremely angry too."

"All your life you have been guided by your heart. It leads you. But you must hold it in subjection. Only then will you become master."

"I listen to your words, but think otherwise. . . ."

"The contents of your heart are hidden from me, Kyrill, though I would give much to remould it."

"I have no objection. Only every stone we set brings back the thought: slave, slave, slave! 'Twould have been better to have stayed in Ruza. Directly I got here I began to dream. Oh, that I had never allowed myself to dream, rather than renounce the dream once I had let it take possession of me!"

Alis was stinted of masons and those he had were the Prince's slaves. They went in fear of being sent to Mozhai and strove to their utmost to alleviate their former lot.

On the opposite shores of the river and on rafts there were constant crowds of people who enjoyed watching the growth of the building, as if they themselves were laying stone upon stone. Some there were who hailed from far distances. They lounged all the day through gazing at the masons as they laid the stones. Others bandied words with the masons, offering advice or passing derogatory remarks as though the edifice were being erected specially for themselves. But the warning cry of the guards put their words to flight as an arrow pierces a bird on the wing.

"Hullo, you lout, keep a civil tongue behind your teeth!"

"All very well to say 'keep', but a word hasn't got a tail. It's not a sparrow, you see, for it flies away and you can't lay hands on it."

"Ho, ho!"

"Besides, why should we hold our tongues?"

"Because a word is like straw. Once it catches fire there are no means of stamping it out."

"But a shooting-turret is not made of straw."

"Ho, ho! You've been advised to hold your tongue."

"Mine happens to be a slippery one. Suppose you come and hold it yourself?"

"Impudent rascal! Learn when it is wise to speak and when to be silent."

"The Lord did not give us tongues that we should not use them."

"And you, Gregori the Theologian, are you a monk? And if not, what are you?"

"And you yourself, Mr. Overseer, are you not from Ryazan?"

"What makes you think that?"

"Your way of speaking."

"Oh, I could die of laughing . . ."

But the stonemasons held their peace.

Dmitri visited administrative units of his principality, went out hunting, returned, and issued forth again.

Meanwhile, the walls rose inexorably and speedily, as had been ordered. Dmitri came to have a look at the building, with Bobrok in tow. No one else was with them; his men stayed outside the pallisade which enclosed the site.

"Well, master, how's God treating you?"

"I have no complaints to make of God, my lord," said Alis.

This answer interested Dmitri, and he inquired of Bobrok:

"What God does he worship?"

"He's a follower of Mahomed, the same as the Tatars."

"Which means that we have engaged smiths of the same persuasion as those for whom we are forging our trap," laughed Dmitri.

Alis did not understand their talk, but took their laughter as a good sign. He asked:

"What am I to do? My workers grumble at the restrictions imposed upon them. They are forbidden to go into the town. Of course, I understand, and have told them that there is need of haste. As soon as the building is finished, I say to them, you'll be free to go downtown."

"But why should they want to go?" said Dmitri, puckering his brow.

"A word is like a hawk; it is created to stoop at a dove. When hawks are mewed in a pen, they have no outlet for their predatory instincts. Words seek ears that they may build nests in them."

"There is no salvation in garrulousness," observed Dmitri. "Work in silence. That will bring you salvation."

"I thank you, Lord Dmitri Ivanovich," said Alis with a bow.

Accompanied by Bobrok and Alis, Dmitri passed on his way and came close to where Kyrill stood bowing.

"You unkempt slave!" exclaimed Dmitri.

Bobrok hesitated, not knowing whether or not to translate the Prince's words into Greek. So he held his peace, and Dmitri, turning to him, declared:

"Much obliged to you, Dmitri Mihailovich. I note that you have not forgotten what we agreed to about deaf-mute stonemasons."

"Rather a stony speechlessness, Prince," answered Bobrok with a hearty laugh, while glancing round suspiciously at Kyrill. But Kyrill remained in the same reverential attitude, apparently too weak to straighten his back.

Without a word Dmitri continued his inspection of the fortifications and climbed up the scaffold to where the masons were at work. He examined the bricks to see whether they had been properly baked in the kiln and would not run the risk of crumbling away. For this had happened at Kolomna. There, the Church of the Intercession of Our Lady had been long in construction, yet hardly had the scaffolding been removed than the whole edifice caved in. It turned out that the ground courses of bricks were not strong enough to support the weight of the structure, which had slipped like moist sand. But here, in the Kremlin, the bricks were excellent.

From the top of the turret Dmitri surveyed Moscow. The whole of the

far side of the river was, as it were, drowned in gardens. Occasionally from among the green the roofs of houses peeped forth, or one caught a flashing gleam of the scaly domes of churches. To the left St. Paraskeva's cupola glittered radiantly. Ignatius Titus, the Ryazan merchant, had caused it to be erected as a memento of the sanctuary Moscow had granted him. Life for the merchant class was precarious in Ryazan, and at any moment the Tatars might descend upon their treasure-chests. So Titus had fled, bringing all his goods and chattels with him. Moscow did not look upon the wealthy as hindrances, and the poor were made welcome as prospective tax-payers. Thinly populated lands bring no revenue to the coffers of the treasury. Moscow waxed rich as her population grew. Some of the princes envied Dmitri, murmuring:

"You, Prince, use magic. Or Bobrok does so for you."

Bobrok was regarded as a magician merely because he was very learned and had seen much of the world. But Dmitri held to the Muscovite adage: "Be kind to people and they will seek you out. It is better to lose a mite on ten kopecks than by gaining a mite to lose both the man and the kopeck."

Dmitri gazed down on the Kremlin. Under his father it had been made entirely of wood, and in places this wood had rotted and mouldered away. It had been decided never again to build with wood, since the great fire had burned down all the walls as though they had been a birchwood box. High walls were erected, in places two and three rows of them, wall upon wall. The moat was deepened and the ground was completely cleared. In certain towns the strongholds were circular, in others the forts were polygonal. But Moscow's Kremlin stood four square to all the winds that blow. Yet it did not present the appearance of a rectangular cube. It was shaped, rather, like a stirrup, or, better still, like an axe with the blade pointing westward and the haft towards the domains of the Tatars.

As building after building arose, each was painted, was embellished in some way. Each was imbued with man's love of beauty, with human sorrows and human joys. Dmitri knew each one of them personally, for they were all built under his own eyes, under his individual care, advice, and words of encouragement. True, everything had not always turned out according to plan, for at times the carpenters' predilections held sway, while at others the masons would give free scope to their own fancies. Much, too, had arisen, as it were, of its own accord, things of beauty, but it had never entered the Prince's mind to create such structures. He saw for himself that the *ensemble* was beautiful, as if some friends had made him unwonted gifts: here of a church the like of which had never been seen before; there of a house pleasant to behold amid the shadow of foliage. Maidens and women were tripping on the fresh young grass, their vividly coloured sarafans showing up prettily against the greensward.

When Dmitri had come down from the tower he thrust a finger into a barrel of mortar as if it had been dough.

"Will it be fit to support the watch-tower?" he inquired.

"Oh, it will hold for centuries," exclaimed Alis in a rapture of delight.

He had been wont to see the Emperor of Byzantium, but the latter would never have demeaned himself to a mason's trade, would never have pushed his finger into cement. A man could work for Dmitri. Futile, vain, meaningless were Kyrill's frowns.

Lanterns were brought, and by their bright, dancing light the Grand Prince descended to the underground passage, whence issued the smell of something between cat's dung and a yawning grave. A nauseating odour.

The damp earth, not having been cleared out of the way, impeded the work of

the excavators, and likewise the masons who were putting up the arches for the vaulted roof. Rains lashed the builders, the sun scorched them, the winds parched their throats. But the Prince ruthlessly urged them on to dig, dig, dig. Dmitri went over every nook and cranny, asking himself whether this was solid, that would hold and was warranted to endure. Could this part of his principality be assured to him for all time? In the end Dmitri was satisfied. He went to examine the food, too.

"The cooking is infamous," he declared. "You cannot expect men to do first-class work on food like that. Satisfy the workers and their spirit will rise to the occasion."

"I will see to the matter," promised Bobrok.

Beneath the tower the men went on burrowing like moles into the bowels of the earth, widening the old passage and strengthening it with stone in place of the slimy, rotten, oaken shell. Long did they go on digging. Each man showed zeal. Each man opened his heart. In three months they finished the Tainitski Tower. The priest would now consecrate it.

Dmitri ordered that a solemn service of thanksgiving should be held. The Prince's kinsmen, the boyars, the whole Court was summoned to attend the ceremony. Many a prince travelled from distant lands, for it was not every day that a tower was consecrated in Moscow. Besides, all were curious to see the results of the vaunted skill of the Grand Prince's masons. Rumour is like the wind, invisible to the eye but rapid in flight, touching all, enlivening all in the calm of quiet days.

But the builders themselves would not be permitted to attend the service, and not a drop of holy water would be sprinkled on their grimy faces. They were to be sent off to a town whose very name had never been heard before. There they were promised complete and long rest. Bobrok was to accompany them on their pilgrimage.

Head erect, Alis stood watching as a gilded lion, forged of iron, was hoisted above the completed turret. The platform was being decorated with young birch boughs. Preparations were afoot for the blessing of the holy water and the thanksgiving service. Bobrok came to a halt behind Alis and stood gazing at the man. Alis turned about and bent low in greeting, his hand humbly pressing his heart. Bobrok said:

"Well, are you satisfied with the building?"

"It is better than anything I have built before. I did not leave to Constantinople what I have brought to you."

"That's as it should be. A slave has to show zeal in his lord's service."

"Precisely."

"The Prince commanded me to tell you that you are a good master craftsman and have earned a rest. He will reward you."

Alis drew himself up. He was considering what he should say, when he met Bobrok's fixed and ominous eyes. The words died on his lips ere they were uttered. Alis became aware that something terrible was brewing. Yet he recollected the words of praise the Prince had conveyed to him and the promise of favours to come. So taking heart, he smiled into Bobrok's face. Dmitri Mihailovich laid a hand on Alis's shoulder, and, taking a ring from his own finger, slipped it over Alis's, saying:

"This I give to you before the Grand Prince offers you his token."

Again Alis bowed as he took leave of the gracious magnate.

They were led through the streets of Moscow with honour. Cavalry rode on

either side of them. They were attired in new, clean clothes. All Moscow envied them.

"They have finished the watch-tower. Now they will receive their reward and be provided for."

The horsemen kept the crowd from encroaching, crushing, or otherwise disturbing those who brought up the rear of the procession. The march past was taken at a leisurely pace so that the men might drink their fill of the town, whose buildings lay huddled together, damp, wooden, unwelcoming and yet so fascinating. How often had these men gazed down on Moscow as they laboured, the city of their desires and expectations! But on this day, without so much as touching a splinter of the town, they were being escorted away from it.

Roads in Russia ran either along the rivers or across forests, through dense woodlands. The builders of the Tainitski Tower went through the woods. Evidently the Prince wished that they should reach their place of rest with the utmost expedition. The trees rose ever darker and thicker above them. Kyrill had a premonition that the road they were following led to the river Bori, which meant the Troitska monastery.

"Surely we are not going to build for Sergei?" thought he.

The soldiers called a halt and surrounded the men. A blade flashed. A cry filled the air. Blood gushed forth.

Kyrill doubled beneath a horse's belly to hurl himself among some juniper bushes. The horse reared and its rider wheeled about in pursuit of the fugitive. It is easier for a man on foot to scramble through the forest than for a rider, for every branch catches and hinders the horseman. But speed was necessary. Time is not a compressible substance. . . .

A day later the guard returned to Moscow, cutting hastily athwart the populous, miry town.

Established for ever, the gilded lion on the summit of the tower flashed in the rays of the summer sun.

On the following day Dmitri was to go forth to meet the procession headed by the cross and bearing ikons. The Prince's friends, as though they were younger brothers, were to follow in his wake. To the sound of pealing bells he was to take the image of Our Saviour, a work not made with mortal hands, from the monks and convey it to the appointed place. Then he would kneel before it, thanking God for knowledge vouchsafed to his slaves, his masons, and Alis of Shemakha in the performance of this mighty task.

None will ask the names of the builders, nor the spot where their wounded bodies lay buried. The priest will not pray for the peace of the souls of these deceased servants, for they were not the servants of God but of the Prince. They were men of an alien creed, not participants in the holy mysteries but in the mysteries of the Tainitski Tower. And that this mystery might not be made manifest in some dim future, they had been laid to rest for all eternity under the mosses of the forest.

Chapter V

THE SHEPHERD

THE CAVALCADE STARTED AT DAYBREAK IN ORDER TO REACH THE FOREST BEFORE the midday heat. The morning was bright. The completion of the tower was to be celebrated by a big hunt. Though the hour was so early, the city was

already astir. "Dmitri's off on a jaunt," some had said. Other townsfolk were going to church or to market.

That year Moscow stood fresh and bonny. A short while ago the city had been burned to the ground. But now, old houses had become a rare sight, whilst the new buildings were in a variety of styles. In Pskov, Novgorod, and even in Pereyaslawl-Zaleski, there arose out of the embers the same forms of construction, for life had taken root there many centuries ago. Whether in village or town, the age-old customs had been adhered to and each house was identical with its neighbour, cornice to cornice as in the grandsires' day.

Moscow stood at the cross-roads. People migrated from the east and passed on to the north. From the west they wandered in a straight line from Varyuzh to Hvalinsk, from the Surozh shores to the White Sea coasts. While some passed on their way, others stayed behind in the town which had been laid waste, gutted, lying in escheat and therefore needing men. People from Pskov settled here. Others came from Novgorod. Ryazan merchants sought refuge in the city to get as far away from the Tatars as possible. Greek craftsmen came to ply their trade. The Genoese expected to receive honours from the Prince. Lithuanians craved sanctuary to safeguard their faith from their heretical prince Olgerd. Men from Kiev forsook the impoverished homes of their forefathers and trekked hither with their entire households. Thus the population of Moscow was heterogeneous, presenting many types. Each and all endeavoured to make the new dwelling as like the old one as possible, for 'tis sweet to preserve a semblance of the paternal home in the setting of the new.

So the houses which arose out of the embers differed from one another: some were squat, thick-walled, and solid; others were high, full of light and gaily painted; yet others resembled narrow, pointed towers, or were fancifully carved, or were devoid of every trace of beauty, like the cells of anchorites. Stockades surrounded a few, whilst others were unpretentiously hospitable and open to all and sundry. It gladdened the heart to see the beautiful whole which was Moscow. As calamity succeeded calamity she was resuscitated on ampler lines and became more wonderful than ever. Neither fire nor pestilence nor the invader's sword could ever destroy her so long as the Russian language united the Russia of many tongues. The very name of the town in Russian, Moskva, means "she-bear". Get the better of her? Just try!

Dmitri rode a piebald horse. This was unusual, for the Prince was expected to stride a milk-white charger. But the piebald steed was swift-footed, and that is what counts when the hunt is up.

His cap, trimmed with blue fox, had been woven and embroidered by Mamai's women in the Horde. It encircled his face while leaving eyes, nose, and mouth freely exposed. It was pulled down securely on his head so that during the fastest gallop it could not fall off.

A master-tailor had made his coat, but it was thought too plain to befit a prince, though the material was costly and of Flemish or Persian manufacture. Whereabouts on Dmitri's person could be that sparkling gold? Yet sparkle he did. Was it in the rings or the belt or the embroidered breeches?

The streets were none too wide in those days. Two horses could be ridden abreast, and even at a pinch, three. So this morning's calvacade to the hunt stretched out like an endless riband.

Lean and splay-bearded rode Prince Vladimir of Serpuhov, Dmitri's brother. His apparel was more ostentatious, and his horse, from head to tail, was so richly caparisoned in damask that its colour could not be seen.

Even more magnificent was Dmitri Bobrok. Though his beard was already

besprinkled with silver, there was no mistaking the warrior in him. How well he sat his horse! He did not seem to ride as his steed caracoled among the citizens. Were he to be stripped of his finery, his body would be ghastly to behold, for it was scarred by battles and with wounds, many of which had never properly healed. He had been smitten with the steel of many tribes: Tatar, Lithuanian, Bulgar, Cheremissian, and the blades of Nizhni-Novgorod, yet he had escaped with his life through all. God be praised, it was not his fate to be slain. While serving the Prince of Serpuhov, he paid allegiance to Moscow. In days of old his exploits would have been sung in ballads as were those of Murometz; he would have been praised like Dobrynia; for he excelled, not only in feats of arms but also in wisdom. He wielded power, too, since he had married Dmitri's sister.

Brenko was utterly different. That was obvious to everyone. Though one of Dmitri's intimates, he was as ungainly as a calf. He sat a horse as if it were a log, so stolidly that he could not be bruised, and leaned over it as though he and the animal were of one piece. But he was in great favour with the Grand Prince, was his intimate counsellor and inseparable companion. His attire for all its sumptuousness was slovenly. Rich and glittering, but ill-fitting as though he were wearing Dmitri's cast-off clothing. Were this really the case it would be deemed a great honour. But it was not. He was a clumsy, peaceable sort of man but mighty inquisitive, always on the lookout for something. He poked his nose into everything—were the people observing some ritual, was a church service being held amid the lighted tapers, or a festival taking place as it should—he invariably found time to be present.

The Prince of Tarusa rode by, looking for all the world like a crow. A swarthy man, clad in black, with nothing colourful or cheerful about him. A lowering cloud, not a radiant prince. His mount, too, was black; it had a white star on its forehead, but even that was hidden by dark blue tassels dangling from the bridle. The animal's mail was of silver instead of gold. Were the people of Tarusa so poor that they could not equip their prince in seemly fashion as became his dignity? Learning he had—a proper bookworm, with the gift of tongues. But he certainly had no conception of Russian taste in the matter of dress. And what a face! It was as if made of wax.

"A monk, a blackfriar, an ascetic, that's what you ought to be. You'd make a fine abbot," he was told.

Quite the opposite picture was presented by young Prince Ivan of Bielozersk. His face was as bright as his clothing and armour, and he had so close a likeness to Dmitri that the two might have been taken for brothers. If his eyes caught those of a maid his cheeks would glow like the morning sun through a white mist. As to the girls themselves, they had no eyes for anyone else if he were about. His horse was small but restive, tossing its head and champing its bit. "That is too small a beast for so dashing a fellow."

The lowly must not gape too openly at the passing huntsmen. They have to pay homage to each in turn and bow to the ground. To stare would be an effrontery.

So all Moscow bowed low to Dmitri's huntsmen, from the Grand Prince himself down to the humblest keeper of the hounds. Even the dogs' collars were of gilt. Therefore a hound was wealthier than a merchant, yet a merchant had honour paid to him.

The cavalcade rode forward and the citizens of Moscow marvelled and felt vexed if one of the boyars of the city looked shabbier than his companion from Serpuhov or Tarusa or elsewhere. Severe judgments were passed; and there

would be a peckload of gossip, for it was not every day nor even every year that such a sight was beheld. At times the horsemen passed by so swiftly that they could not be seen adequately—and a description at second-hand was not satisfactory. Or the throng caught no more than a fleeting glimpse. But now the crowd was not so dense and everyone could look his fill. The year had been a great one for sights. In the winter there had been Alexei's funeral. At this the press of people had been so vast that it had been impossible to squeeze through the crowd. The Metropolitan from Constantinople had officiated at the Requiem, and bishops came from every town. Throughout Russia the passing-bell had tolled its mournful dirge. But today all was different.

Dmitri rode through the whole length of his city, past gardens whose grass and leaves were heavy with dew, past walls bespattered with mud at the base, but which still oozed resin and were pink, not grey like the Moscow of before the fire. On every hand the carpenters were at work, the sound of axes chopping wood filled the air. The frames of houses stood ready to be moved into place and shavings trampled under the horses' hoofs deadened the sound of their passage. Here a post was being driven in; there two men were hammering an oaken frame with the butt end of their axes, while a housewife gathered up the chips, for she wished to put her new stove to the test. A girl's voice was raised in song from behind a fence. The time was ill chosen, for Mass was not yet finished, and anyway it was unseemly to bare one's heart thus openly to the world at large so early in the day. Yet the voice was pleasing:

"To the ice-cold bubbling spring,
A maid her buckets here did bring.
Not foreseeing any harm,
She held a bucket on her arm . . ."

Bielozerski cocked his eye . . . A pleasant voice indeed:

"On the cruel Tatars came,
Seized the maiden without shame,
Made her captive, made her wed
An unloved Hordesman—great her dread . . ."

Conscious of the beauty of her voice, she gave full scope to it, trilling away and soaring high. There she stood by the open wicket. She turned her head. Oh, God Almighty! She had no face.

"Do you know that house, Mihail Andreich?"

"I do," answered Brenko. "It's Valui's place. The lass was picked up by a wall outside Ryazan. Her whole body was scalded with boiling pitch or water by the Tatars. One eye alone remained—and her voice. Well, you've heard it. That is all that is left of her rare beauty, and that's why no one stops her from singing."

"Good," mused Dmitri.

They left the suburbs and emerged on to hilly ground. A haze of heat shimmered beyond the Moscow river. Crickets chirped in the grass. Butterflies' wings glowed vividly in the clear morning light. It seemed just like the steppe except that it lacked spaciousness. Ahead, the sharply pointed helmets of the forest rose through a blue mist. Stooks were stacked about the meadows; here and there hay was strewn in rows to dry. The air was filled with the sweetness of freshly mown grass. Two peasants, in long white smocks, were stamping the hay down on a rick, while the golden harvest was handed up to

them. The horses turned this way and that and neighed to one another. A fair-haired lad bestrode a bay mare. His seat was easy and arrogant. This annoyed the Prince of Tarusa. With a scathing glance at the horseman, he said to Bobrok:

"Some men, once they fling a leg across the saddle, deem themselves commanders."

"Russia needs good riders. Our sworn foe has better horsemen than we," replied Bobrok. Tarusa shrugged his shoulders dubiously.

Tumbling from out carts or hay-ricks, the peasants scurried to the roadside. Some knelt, while others lay face downwards on the earth. But all were eager to hear the clatter of hoofs and the clank of arms as Dmitri's cavalcade passed by, to catch a chance word, or leastways the murmur of voices.

The hounds dragged on the leashes, their lolling tongues dripping saliva. The keeper's lash whistled over their heads and brought them to heel.

Long before noon the party had gained the woods. The primeval forest lay all around with its carpet of russet-brown pine needles overgrown with thick moss as with mildew. A great stillness and peace enfolded the huntsmen.

"What a place for a monastery! The quiet of it!" exclaimed Brenko.

"I'm not aware of any scent of incense," said Bielozerski. "Besides, soft earth would inflame rather than subdue them."

Dmitri frowned at the young man.

"Looking after monks is the business of a prior. Ours is the task of up-keeping the premises. No water is to be found here and the ground is as flat as a pancake. Such a place could not withstand an attack. A cloister is a stronghold of the Lord, but a stronghold is useful to us laymen. This is why we build monasteries that the faith may be preserved. Think it over, Prince. Many a warrior ends his days as a monk. We release them from military service so that they can go into monastic life, not into the grave."

The party had thought to tide over the heat of the day by camping in this place. But neither brook nor spring could be found. A halt without water is no good to a pedestrian, still less so to a cavalier.

As they penetrated deep into the forest the trees became more varied and light glimmered through their branches. The men entered a clearing which had once been under the plough but was now scrub. Near by a bell tinkled. The hounds craned their necks towards the sound, scenting a herd and milk.

The huntsmen emerged into a glade. Lank sheep huddled together on its fringe trying to shelter from the heat. They shook their heads, and ran aimlessly to and fro in an endeavour to avoid the gadflies which pestered them. Dogs started to bark. The acrid odour of sheep filled the air. A yearling ewe raised its muzzle to bleat, its long eyes gazing round in apprehension. The young shepherd in charge, a tattered sheepskin cloak thrown over his underwear and holding a snakelike whip in his hand, stared about him in bewilderment. Should he drop to his knees or run to fetch the herdsman or seek safety in the woods? What was he to do? So many fighting-men attacked Moscow. Who might these folk be? In bygone years Olgerd's Lithuanians prowled about the region and carried off the flocks. A lad might get into trouble with these men, too.

"Whose beasts are these?" shouted Dmitri. His voice, which had gained volume on the battlefield, was still youthful and sonorous. The words winged their way among the trees and were echoed back, filtering through the woods like smoke:

"Who-o-o-o . . ."

"They belong to the Grand Prince of Moscow. So does the whole of Russia belong to Dmitri Ivanovich."

"What's the size of this flock?"

"Fifteen hundred head."

"Do you know me, my lad?"

"The herdsman is a knowledgable fellow. Permit me to call him."

"That's right, young man, go and summon him."

The boy sprinted off. The sheep near by shied into the forest where the greater part of the flock was hiding. The lad, with his dogs at his heels, was soon swallowed up among the trees. Only the bell-wether remained in the vicinity like a bird caught in a fowler's net.

An ancient tottered out of the forest, tripping over his crook and shading his suppurating eyes from the glare. Barefooted, he made his way slowly towards Dmitri. His tattered garments were grey, his beard long, and sprinkled with white. The skin of his face was brown as bark, either from exposure to sun and wind or from age, none could tell. It resembled the face of a Suzdal ikon, though the smell of him was not that of cypress but the pungent reek of sheep. Wool stuck to his coarse clothing, and he must have cast off his coat as he walked along the path. As though bolstering him up on either side, pressing against him closely, stalked two huge, shaggy sheep-dogs.

He bowed from the waist, striving all the time to see against the light. But the sun shone too brightly in the old man's eyes, which he vainly endeavoured to shield with his palsied hand.

"Was it you who summoned me?"

"Who may you be, gaffer?"

"The herdsman."

"Is the pasture good?"

"Plentiful, my son."

"Is there water in the vicinity?"

"'Tis an excellent camping ground. Follow me, boyars."

At a shambling trot he led them into the brushwood. The horses, brightening up, kept pace with the shepherd's gait.

The party reached a hazel copse on a hillock at whose base in a gully there flowed a limpid river winding its way among alders. Huge, solitary pines reared their crests like tents overgrown with moss. Carpets were spread out for the huntsmen's repose. Ere ever a page of his bodyguard had time to spring forward and hold his gilt stirrup Dmitri leaped from the saddle and strolled down to the stream. Kneeling on a flat stone, he drank water from his cupped hands—though by now the page had overtaken him and stood in the back-ground with a chased ladle and a towel thrown over his arm.

The shepherd, having shooed off the sheep-dogs with his crook, waxed curious and questioned the men. Who was the leader of the troop? What his rank? Where did he come from and what might be his name? But he got no answer until Dmitri, his head and beard dripping water, came back to the spot where the carpets had been spread.

"It is Dmitri Ivanovich."

The old man pushed his way through the men-at-arms, who out of respect for so venerable a figure did not hinder him, and prostrated himself at Dmitri's feet.

"Prince," he cried, "'tis not my eyes but my heart should have known you. But I did not. I am infirm, gone to seed, and tend cattle. I carry a shepherd's crook and no spear."

"And did you ever wield a spear?"

"Ay, many a time."

"Under whom did you serve?"

"Under your father, Ivan Ivanovich."

"Under my father?"

"Yes, under your sire and under your uncle Simeon before him. But now I carry a crook and no spear."

"My uncle?"

"Your uncle—your uncle, Prince. I had been Diudieni's captive and dragged the weary days along in the infidel's camp. I saw the accursed foe make bonfires of our cities. I witnessed the sack of Murom, Suzdal, and Vladimir, Yuriev, Pereyaslav and Uglich. Kolomna and Moscow went up in flames before my very eyes. Mozhai and Dmitrov lay in ruins. And it was at Dmitrov that the Lord delivered me from fire and captivity. I fled."

"A hundred years have gone by since those times of calamity. Were you really there? Or do you speak from hearsay?"

"My memory is not what it was, Prince. But I went to the wars earlier even than that. I got my fill of blood on the river Sit. Earlier still, I fled from Batu near Kolomna on the Oka. Then it was that for the first time I was captured by the infidel. We were jostled off to Kiev, but that town, too, had been laid waste and forsaken by its people as a nest is in autumn. Nought but feathers and broken egg-shells and russet leaves on top. When we entered Ryazan, to the relief of the folk there, I marched with Kolovrat's regiment. We arrived too late. The place was a heap of charred ruins. The Tatars had already gone. The princes, chieftains, warriors, citizens, and youths sprawled dead among the frozen grass under the snow-drifts. Then said Evpati Kolovrat, 'O city of Ryazan, too late have we come to save thee from Batu! We hoped to dry the tears of thy folk, but there are none left to weep or moan. Neither are there any women to wail thy loss. All are lying together in death.' Kolovrat had one thousand seven hundred men-at-arms. We hurled ourselves in pursuit of Batu and began slaughtering his host. Batu, so it is said, raised his voice in alarm, saying: 'The dead of Ryazan have risen and are upon us!' The Tatars were seized with a great fear and men innumerable were slain. When many of us were killed and exhausted, five were taken prisoner. We were bled white by then and brought before Batu. 'Who be ye?' he asked. To which we replied: 'We are men of Ryazan. The city hid us that we might give you the kind of escort the Russians invariably provide for the invader—arrows and spears.' Batu ordered honourable burial for Evpati and took us to Kolomna. It was in the battle of Kolomna, as I have already told you, that we escaped."

"A century and a half has gone by since then, little father. How can you recall it all? Maybe you have heard the story from someone else or have dreamed it?"

"I cannot remember, Prince, for my memory is failing. But I went to the wars even before Kolovrat's day. I am a native of Ryazan, and I fought under other princes than those of my own city. My first fight was when Batu came to the Kalka river. I was then in Prince Danila's regiment. We Russians had never seen the Tatars before. They looked to us puny and unsightly. Each prince depended on himself alone and went into battle on his own while the others waited in distant lands for their turn to come. Ah, many were the Christian bodies slain that day! We slashed at the infidels. One man we claved in half from crown to navel. But, lo, for every one we cut down, two would arise to take his place. The more we slaughtered, the greater waxed their

number. Our shoulders grew stiff, our swords were blunted, our arms lost their strength—yet still they multiplied and drove on to the attack. The slaughter of that day shall never be forgotten, nor the bitter cry we raised when none were left to answer it. Great weeping there was and fear and a deep sense of outrage. But revenge for that outrage lies with you, Dmitri Ivanovich, with you."

He raised his shepherd's crook and threw back his head the better to see from beneath his inflamed eyelids.

"The yoke lies too heavily upon us. Slavery and outrage weigh us down to the ground. If spears be scarce, take my crook."

"How old are you, gaffer?"

"I number your sheep. Ask about them. But the Lord God keeps a tally of the years. 'Tis a sin to pry into the angel's book, Prince."

Dmitri invited the shepherd to partake of the princely fare.

Supported on either side, the old man was led to where the carpets were spread. He was offered a platter of fish seasoned with sweet spices.

"What is your name, little father?"

"I was christened Ivan."

"Taste of this, Father Ivan."

The ancient continued to speak.

"A little while ago, Prince, one of your ewes brought forth four lambs. It was her first lambing, yet she gave birth to four lambs. A good omen, Dmitri Ivanovich. This year will prove profitable to you. But it is not for me to say whether there will be an increase in your wealth, your family, or your glory. Nevertheless, thus shall it come to pass."

Dmitri was not listening. He was pondering the old man's earlier words, brooding over the outrage, and thinking of the shepherd's crook ready for battle. As a boy, Dmitri had heard similar words from the boyars. Such had been his father's last bequest as he lay panting for breath on his death-bed. Also his uncle Simeon and his mother had never ceased repeating them. Today, in the silent forest, beside the peaceful flock, they sounded like a clarion call. The motherland is swooning, Russian soil is trampled under foot by enemies, the people are calling. He, Dmitri, while bringing the princes to heel, still paid homage to Mamai and donned Mamai's cap—the cap he received from Mamai in place of his own, when, according to the custom of the Horde, he and his fellow-guests fraternized at a feast by exchanging headgear. This same cap now lay carefully beside him. He kicked it as though it were a dog, and perhaps, who knows, it squealed as it bounced away. Everybody noticed that Dmitri was frowning and that his lips were pursed as though he were on the battlefield. But soon his hand left the hilt of his dagger to rub his cheeks with vigour. When he removed his hands, his cheeks were pale, but his mouth smiled.

"A toast to the oldest among us. Here's to Father Ivan!"

"I drink only water, Prince."

He was immediately offered a gilt cup full of water.

"Your very good health, Dmitri Ivanovich. Most gracious are you to me, my lord."

"It is but a particle of what you deserve, Father Ivan."

The company then stretched itself on the rugs or grass for the noontide rest. Dmitri, Vladimir Serpuhovski, and Bobrok alone wandered away towards the stream with the old man in their wake.

A hedge-sparrow fluttered from spray to spray, twittering as it went. Perhaps it feared for the safety of the nearby nest and hoped to divert attention from the fledglings. So small a bird, yet eager to protect its young.

Other birds, however, attracted attention. There was a large flock of them wheeling high in the sky. The alder grove shut off much of the heavens, and it was only in the open that a man could observe them. A falcon, escaped from the hunt, soared at a tremendous height. While the men sat at meat, this bird of prey must have swooped on a starling. Now scores—nay, thousands—of starlings had massed to the attack, and the falcon vainly tried to break away. Its feathers came whirling down from above, for the smaller birds were plucking at its wings and head far aloft. Whistling and scolding filled the air until the falcon dropped from the dizzy height into the wood below. But even here the starlings continued to mob their ancient foe.

Vladimir shouted angrily:

"What's that falconer about to let the bird escape?"

"Hold your peace, Vladimir Andreich," interpolated Bobrok. "This is a sign from heaven, and it means that the Horde is powerful. Since the days of Batu it has beaten us one by one. But if we stand together, as one flock, will we not be as this feathered army? Does a force exist that can withstand us then? This is the interpretation of the omen. It is of more worth than all our falcons."

"The people are of one mind in this business. Only the princes continue to quarrel and keep apart. Prior Sergei is endeavouring to arouse their consciences by word of mouth. Ours the task of carrying on the good work with the sword. While there is breath in my body," said Dmitri, "I shall not sheathe my sword."

"We, too, shall not leave you in the lurch."

"Ay, brother, that we will not."

Thus they plighted their troth beneath the shining dome of the July sky amid the twitter of agitated birds and by the everlasting flow of the woodland stream.

The clatter of horses' hoofs, now muffled by the thick moss, now sounding nearer and nearer, made the three men turn and make for the place under the spreading pines where Bulgar carpets had been laid for the midday rest. But the horseman made a bee-line towards them through the clearing. The hoofs of his steed caught in one of the rugs. The rider bent low to avoid the overhanging boughs. He pulled up his mount all steaming and dark with sweat. As the soldier was hurling himself out of the saddle his foot caught in the stirrup and his leg became entangled in the leather trappings. Thus hanging from the saddle, he delivered his message:

"The Tatars have set fire to Nizhni. The Prince has withdrawn beyond the Oka. The territory is devastated. It is rumoured that the Tatars have made a junction with a huge army in the steppes and are marching against us, lord."

"What about the people?" asked Dmitri.

"They have fled beyond the Volga."

"Is Mamai himself with the army?" Bobrok inquired.

"Mamai is not with the army. Begich is in command."

Dmitri blanched and, biting his lips, turned to Bobrok.

"The time has come," said he.

He hastened to the couches, where his princely apparel lay guarded by one of the pages.

"Bobrok, we have not a moment to waste. Courage! Everybody is to be called up—at once. Order the horses to be saddled without delay. The hunt will follow as fast as it can."

Dmitri summoned his friends.

"Quick, Tarusa, Bielozerski, Brenko! To horse with you. We are getting back to Moscow with the utmost speed."

"What's up, Prince?"

"The Tatars have burned Nizhni."

"Have you any news of Dmitri Constantinovich?" asked Tarusa.

"So far as I know, my father-in-law is alive," Dmitri said, waving them aside. "He took to the woods." Thereupon he hastened towards his horse, which was being led from the cool shade of the forest.

Without waiting for his court to assemble, Dmitri galloped off, sparing neither beast nor whip. Now and again the branches struck at his shoulders. His unbuttoned coat bellied in the wind. His followers found it hard to keep pace with him. He shouted constantly to Bobrok:

"We've eaten enough humble pie. We've paid homage. But all that is over and done with. Now we are going to fight."

Trailing in the rear, the hunt returned to Moscow. The forest, where but a short while earlier the Grand Prince's company had been assembled so peacefully, and where the fires still smouldered, was deserted. The last of the riders disappeared among the trees. The ancient shepherd stood alone in the clearing. His crook, which had not been accepted as an equivalent for a spear, trembled in hands which still craved for battle.

Chapter VI

THE MESSENGER

A MESSENGER SPED THROUGH THE FOREST FROM MOSCOW TO THE TROITSA monastery.

As thick as hair on a bear's back, the forests covered the Russian countryside from end to end.

The earth was humid, the rivers were deep and abundantly supplied with fish. The roads, which could hardly be called roads at all, were at places impassable. They were the merest tracks, suitable enough for horsemen and pedestrians, but quite unfitted for wheeled traffic. Even when the summer was a dry one, vehicles got stuck in the ruts. But when it rained there was no means of extricating the wheels. A rod has two ends and hits either way. The roads were like that. While the sticky surface was difficult for Russian wheels to negotiate, for the enemy host it was impassable.

All around Moscow the forest formed a solid wall.

Many beasts and all manner of game found a home in these sombre, crowded depths. There were wild boar and elk, deer and roe, lynx, bears and wolves, squirrels, foxes, badgers, beavers, martens, and hares. Also uncanny, outlandish, invincible creatures, evil and unclean heathen spirits, lurked in the wild depths of the forests. Runaways found hide-outs for themselves here and bandits made their homes in the solitudes.

Those who feared the wild beasts travelled by day, for a wild animal goes in fear of man and sleeps in the daytime.

The man who went in dread of his fellow-man passed through the forest during the night. It is easier for man to hide from man in the dark.

To reach Mozhai from Moscow, mile upon mile had to be traversed, and dark indeed were the forests through which ran the Mozhai road, and the wind-

ing Moskva river. Serpuhov was considered to be nearer. The highway thither had been more frequently used and was firmer and easier going.

Not everyone could find his way to Troitsa, for there were bogs, moss, impenetrable undergrowth and fallen trees. Innumerable was the wild stock, and sometimes smoke rose from the earth, denoting that a man was trying to save his life or was putting an edge on his steel in order to take the life of his fellow. Springs oozed from under the mossy roots of oaks. If a shout were raised in the forest it echoed back but did not roll away into the distance. True indeed was the saying: The dense forest is deaf, unresponsive, mantled in moss.

Sergei of Radonezh took up his abode in the forest. He was the son of a pensive boyar of Rostov. Leaving his parents, perhaps on account of their poverty, he chose a spot on Makovtsa Hill, overlooking the water. Here he built himself a log hut, an inhospitable place enough, for he wished to seek and procure peace. He kept bees, fished, ate roots and nuts, and thus eked out a living. As the blue smoke spread over the forest quietude, so the fame of Sergei spread through the neighbouring townships. Nor was he alone in his craving for peace. Others flocked to him, begging for asylum, and settling down to be near him. Each fended for himself. Together they built a chapel and named it Troitsa, after the Holy Trinity. Little by little the wretched mud huts were replaced by fairly good timber dwellings. They led a life of abject poverty until the Grand Prince of Moscow learned of the existence of the cloister, and, having heard about it, he gave it his support. Alexei, the Metropolitan of Russia, understood Sergei. He knew the man was utterly disinterested yet very tenacious of purpose, learned yet innocent of pride or any kind of conceit.

But what caused the Metropolitan to esteem Sergei so highly was their community of outlook. Both men were well aware that Russia had many and powerful foes. There were the Tatars in the east, Byzantium in the south, Lithuania in the west, and Sweden in the land of the midnight sun. All these countries wished to grab a piece of Russia. And there were others whose unclean hands were itching to tear out Russia's very heart. In spite of these dangers around them, the Russian princes continued to squabble, never giving a thought to Russia herself but caring only for their own personal advantage. They could not understand that all the profits they made flowed from the people of the country. The late Kalita was a wise man. He understood. He had taken the right road. His protection was upon the serfs when they were unjustly treated, he showed pity for the inhabitants of ruined principedoms, he granted privileges to merchants who had been robbed. Boyars, their children, their retainers, their servants and serfs and refugee villeins, all turned their feet towards Moscow, seeking safety first under Kalita, then under Simeon, Ivan, and the present Prince Dmitri. The princes of Moscow at first absolved each of them from the payment of taxes and forbade the lesser princes, warriors, administrators, and district overseers to do them any harm.

The proclamations issued from the All-Russian Metropolitan resounded throughout the whole land, but what he needed most was persons of initiative who would help in spreading his words far and wide and thus bring about perfect harmony of thought among the people. The mutual similarity of outlook between Alexei and Sergei drew together the envoy from Constantinople, the prelate, the sovereign lord of all Orthodox souls and the humble Prior Sergei. Alexei's appreciation of Sergei's worth had brought the latter to Dmitri's palace. The Grand Prince saw in Sergei a tame lion with claws of steel; a man who spoke in mild tones but whose eye was steady. This lion wished to be tame so long as he was with Dmitri. And through Alexei and

Sergei the Church, too, became tamed. Kalita had shown his wisdom in persuading the All-Russian Metropolitan to leave the ancient see at Vladimir (where the Metropolitan had from time immemorial lived) and transfer to Moscow. The cost of this move had been high, but the result was that the grandson now enjoyed the proximity of the highest prelate in the land. That same winter Alexei died. The Patriarch at Constantinople had negotiated with Dmitri as to a successor. Alexei would have liked Sergei to take the post. But Sergei refused. No matter how much they begged of him and tried to persuade him to accept, he stood to his guns. He remained prior of the small wooden monastery amid the swamps and thickets of the dense forest, when he might have been with the Patriarch gazing his fill at the warm blue sea or at Oleg's shield which hung above the gates of Constantinople.

A messenger sped through the forest.

Messengers from Moscow galloped through the forests on their way to many different towns, villages, and districts to visit princes and boyars. They were sent forth to arouse Russia. Somewhere in the far distances of the steppe Tatars were advancing to invade the country. Somewhere beyond the blue forest their wild horses were neighing, the earth was rising in smoky dust beneath the heathens' hoofs. Every minute was bringing them nearer. They advanced to the accompaniment of clashing steel, the singing of strange songs, which heralded death. An army as unconquerable as it was unavoidable.

A messenger sped through the forest.

He urged his steed over brooks, forded streams, and swam rivers. He bowed his head to avoid overhanging branches. He whipped up and forced the pace as he raced among the lofty pine trees.

At the first halt he fed his mount. At the second halt he himself took a breather. But sleep is not for those who pass through the forest. The horse has but to snort and a man is immediately on the alert. If it is a beast that the animal scents, all is well, for a creature of the wild can be dealt with. But if it is a fellow-man—beware and listen! A man in the forest is more to be feared than any beast.

The messenger lies on the ground with the reins wound tightly about his fist. His knife, stuck into his high boot, is ready to his hand. His sword is at his side. His dagger is thrust into his belt. But how eerie he feels! The forest is dark and dense. You cry aloud. Only an echo returns, there is no other response. The horse paws the ground and the messenger springs to his feet. Is someone approaching on horseback? He listens. A branch cracks. That's a good sign. Were it a man, he would creep along stealthily, utilizing by-paths, for he, too, would be on his guard. The messenger listens. Then, breaking off a hunk of bread, he rummages in his saddle-bags for a piece of meat, from which he cuts a slice.

A little grey bird, perched on a twig, cocked its eye at the man and chirruped. It ventured nearer, hopping on the moss. Such a small bundle of feathers, crowned with a black cap. . . .

"You dear little ball of fluff," thought the messenger. "You hop from twig to twig with no human cares to worry about, no human haste or hurry."

"Twee-twee, twee-twee . . ."

It hopped on to a branch, twisted its head, and pecked at the pine needles. Suddenly it flew to a higher perch.

"Twee-twee, twee-twee."

"Maybe you have fledgelings in your nest, birdie?"

But the ball of fluff was on the moss again. It showed no alarm.

The messenger bent forward. He cracked his whip. Bang! The tiny bird fluttered awhile and then fell on its side.

Thoughtfully picking his teeth with his nail, the messenger stepped over the outstretched body. He gathered up the reins and jumped into the saddle.

He plied his whip and set off at a gallop. The heavy plod of his horse's hoofs was muffled by the damp soil.

The waters of the Voria gleamed through the bushes, but the track, skirting the ravines, led back into the depths of the forest. Here, with the river in full view, the messenger plucked up courage. He reined in and looked around without leaving the saddle. Peace brooded over the forest. It was now high noon and the birds were silent. The messenger's mouth was parched and dry. He longed for a drink. A peasant was sitting on a rotting tree-stump hard by the stream. The collar of his homespun shirt was torn, yet it fitted him neatly, as did the leggings and boots. Indeed, the whole rigout looked so new that it might have been worn for the first time. A fine ring sparkled on his finger.

"Who can guess what sort of a chap he is?" thought the messenger. But the Voria was so near and the knife in his boot was sharp.

"Hi, you there, give me a drop to drink," called the messenger.

"I've nothing to carry water in. Get down and drink for yourself."

After a moment's hesitation the messenger lumbered off his horse. He stretched his legs and threw the bridle round the beast's head so that it, too, could drink. They drew near the water together and bent to quench their thirst. The messenger took the stream at a higher level while the horse nuzzled the current lower down. The peasant, detached and unkempt, watched them in silence with a sullen eye. He seemed to recognize something familiar in the messenger's bent back.

"Perhaps he's one of them and on my track."

He waited until they had satiated their thirst. Then he asked:

"Are you going far?"

"To Troitsa."

"On pilgrimage?"

The messenger felt insulted. Was he not taking a letter from the Prince himself? What a dolt the fellow must be not to have guessed his mission!

"No, I come from Dmitri Ivanovich, Prince of all Russia."

"Ah!" said the peasant knowingly. "Are you in the good graces of Dmitri Ivanovich?"

The messenger felt as if the peasant were laughing at him. Yet he had not said anything amiss, and how could a stray peasant dare to poke fun at a messenger from the Grand Prince himself?

"The Prince is open-handed, great, and magnanimous," he answered.

"And what about your clothes? Are they the Prince's cast-offs?"

True, the man's raiment was not an enviable sight, though his weapons had come from afar and were costly. But it was none of the peasant's business to comment upon such things.

"Whether they be the Prince's or not it is not for you to inquire," he answered haughtily.

No doubt now remained in the peasant's mind. This chap was one of "them" who had led his comrades through Moscow and had smitten them down in the forest.

"You are glib enough. Do you happen to be one of the Prince's boyars?"

The peasant thought to himself: "He has not recognized me. I was clean and tidy then. But perhaps he is pretending not to know me."

"I repeat—that is none of your business. You are nothing better than a tree-stump, and yet you try in vain to think."

"And you, I note, do not even try."

"I can neither read nor am I a monk. Thoughts come into a warrior's brain of themselves. They are apt to give a fellow a pain in the head."

"So that's how things are with you! Do you hail from Moscow?"

"Yes, born there."

"I expect you possess a stone house in the city?"

"It may not be a house built of stone, but anyway it's no worse than yours."

"I have neither a wood nor a stone dwelling. I serve wherever I happen to find myself."

"So that's how it is with you!"

"I suppose you have a wife in Moscow?"

"Naturally."

"A beauty?"

The soldier stood silent, while the peasant crept imperceptibly nearer.

"Perhaps you have little children, too?"

Before the messenger could frame an answer, the peasant had knocked him flat with a powerful blow. Caught thus off his guard, the messenger sprawled on the ground while the peasant leaped on to his chest.

While the peasant gripped after the Adam's apple in his victim's throat, the messenger reached down towards his boot to rip out his knife. But the peasant's knee pressed upon his arm below the elbow.

The soldier tensed his muscles in an endeavour to slip from beneath the heavy weight that was pinning him down. He tried to wrench the hands away from his throat, but before he could do so his Adam's apple burst and rolled away into his gullet. He gulped and choked. Then darkness stole over the forest gloom.

When the convulsive movements of the body had ceased, Kyrill rose to his feet and gazed at the crushed messenger. Now all the man's weapons belonged to him: dagger, knife, sword, shield, and helmet, not to mention the horse. Behind the saddle was an axe. That very morning he had been making his way through the forest vainly trying to think of some way he could get back into the world again. . . .

Now he was equipped like a warrior. The horse was of the finest. Obviously it had been chosen for the purpose of speed. But "more haste, less speed", as the proverb says.

Kyrill led the horse away from the spot and tethered it behind some trees. Then he returned to where the dead soldier lay and dragged the body to the same place. It would be easier to sort things out away from the beaten track.

Here was booty indeed. 'Twas a pity the food had been tampered with, but quite a lot still remained. The pouch the man wore on his chest contained a letter. To think that Kyrill when he started out in the morning had no idea what the day was to bring. When he had escaped death three days ago he had but one thought in mind as he found himself alone on the road to a new life: get away, farther, farther, farther. He stumbled among the trees, branches scratched his face, pine needles stuck in his hair. He knew the way to the Troitsa monastery, but he was at a loss as to what role he should assume there. He might be taken for a runaway slave and be confined to the cellar till such time as his master should find him. And were he never to be claimed, they might make a slave of him in the monastery. This would be worse than death. What else was he but a runaway slave? Hunger tortured him. Yet where was

he to go? So he sat by the stream, stilling the pangs of hunger by drinking water. He might have become a merchant, a monk, a servant. But fate had brought this warrior to him and thus Kyrill became a warrior.

But whither away now? The road to Moscow lay open to his choice. He might be recognized were he to go there. Troitsa was no place for a warrior. He unrolled the letter languidly. Dmitri's handwriting appeared before his eyes.

How full of hatred he felt towards this man! Dmitri had taken him away from slavery, had befriended him and encouraged him to work for him, and when the work was finished he had been sent into the forest so that innocent heads might be chopped off. . . . Alis had fallen there, and Efrem the cook, and the stonemasons Pankrati, Avdei, Elizari, and Ahmet Bukei, and Lazar the Cheremissian, and Huzan the Bulgar. There they lay, twenty-four men in all. Kyrill alone had been saved through the mercy of God. He alone had had a premonition that something evil was afoot. His apprehension had been confirmed while the foundation-stone of the Tainitski Tower was being laid, for he had overheard Dmitri saying to Bobrok:

"You remember our agreement about the stonemasons being dumb?"

Bobrok had cast a quick and furtive glance in Kyrill's direction.

"It was all well planned," Kyrill reflected, and tried to think out ways of escape. Jumping from the walls of the Kremlin meant certain death. To fight his way out past the sentries was a hopeless task.

"I'll make a bolt for it when they lead me away," he thought. "I must persuade Alis to follow me."

But Alis refused to heed his advice, and that was why he now lay in the forest where Kyrill had found a freshly made mound of earth. The grave had been dug with swords and lay in clods instead of in layers. He had found a ring of gold sparkling in the betrotdden grass near the grave-side. Someone must have dropped it. The ring was not of Russian workmanship. Must have been made by the Byzantines or the Ugri. The opal in its gold setting was shaped like a wolf's eye. Not one of his mates had possessed such a ring. He had scrutinized them all, though he avoided Alis's eyes. But how could Alis have come by such a piece of jewellery?

How hateful Dmitri was to him! He would tear the foul manuscript to shreds:

Reverend Father Sergei, the hour of our trial approaches. The Tatars have invaded Russian soil. We shall not meet them as we have been wont to do. The supplications we sent up to God and the plans we made by night with Metropolitan Alexei are bearing fruit. Arms have been stored away. Men have been trained. We shall fight in the name of God. His will be done. Either we shall be defeated or we shall pass with trumpets blaring over the corpses of our ancient foe. I hope to hear from you. Pray for me and bless us, father.

At the bottom of the scroll he had added hastily as an afterthought:

We are rising in defence of Russia. This will not be as other campaigns when we blunted our swords in civil strife, Sergei.

"And what," mused Kyrill, "if this is the one brick for lack of which the edifice of victory could not be completed? And to think that it has fallen into my hands! It is not Dmitri who needs it, but Moscow."

Strolling up to the horse, he took food from the saddle-bag and ate. A sense of well-being flooded him. He began to change clothes. They did not fit

particularly nicely, being too skimpy for him. Still, they made him look younger and slimmer. The armour seemed to shake him out of his sleep and apathy; his step was firmer, even the expression in his eyes altered. His hair tickled his neck, much to his annoyance, and he shoved it up under the helmet as well as he could.

The superfluous clothing he hid in distant bushes. The meat stuck in his teeth, and while he picked it out he strode over to the body of the messenger.

He peered round and listened. The birds, awakened from their midday rest, twittered peacefully.

Gripping the messenger under the armpits, Kyrill dragged the corpse to the ravine. The dry twigs cracked as it rolled down to the bottom. Kyrill imagined that he had grown unused to the saddle, but he found riding as comfortable as ever.

Chapter VII

SERGEI

THE HORSE STUMBLER FROM SHEER WEARINESS WHEN ON A HILL, GLEAMING THROUGH the thinning trees, appeared the monastery buildings surrounded by a wooden wall. A muffled sound of singing came, as it were, from afar. It was the monks chanting vespers.

Kyrill dismounted at the entrance gate and listened.

"They'll soon be finished."

The slow incantations did not disperse, but hung like a cloud of incense in the air. The very same chant would be heard at this hour in Constantinople, in the Horde, in the Orthodox bishop's chapel at Sarai, and far away northward in the five townships of Novgorod. The melody, which had been modified to the rhythm of Russian lilts, had taken birth in the East, maybe in heathen Athens or Alexandria, or perhaps it had been wafted from the Egyptian pyramids to the boggy forests. Words changed, nations died, but the measure of the hymns endured throughout the ages. There was something intimate in both words and voices which stirred Kyrill's heart—memories of childhood; not the sense but the sound. He felt no inclination to pray. All he wanted was to sit in the wayside dust, close his eyes, and listen to the tunes he had learned as a youngster.

After a while the soldier in him ousted the weakness of the monk, and he rattled the key chain at the gate.

The judas slid up and he was examined through the small peephole. Kyrill said:

"In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost."

"Amen," came the answer from the other side of the gate.

He was motioned to come in. Leading his horse under the gateway, Kyrill doffed his helmet.

The courtyard was deserted and peace prevailed. A man came to this wilderness not to violate its tranquillity but to absorb it into his heart.

Across the lawn strutted a golden cock.

"I come from the Prince with a message to the father superior," declared Kyrill to the gate-keeper.

"He's at his devotions. Wait a while, soldier."

Kyrill tied his horse to a crossbar and then returned to the gate, where he sat down on a bench. A solitary bell beneath the wooden roof of the belfry rang once, twice, and then a third time.

The gatekeeper seated himself at the farther end of the bench.

"Tired, my son?" he inquired.

"Nothing to speak of, father, God be praised."

"Is it safe to travel through the woods?"

Kyrill thought: "He probably puts the same question to everybody. Anyway, he has nowhere to go from here." Then, pointing to the cock, he asked:

"Are hens allowed to live in this place?"

"How could we get our Easter eggs otherwise?"

"Doesn't this provoke temptation in the friars?"

"Lechery is hidden in the heart, son, not in the eyes."

"That's as it may be. Yet lechery creeps into the heart through the eyes."

While the two men were still chatting, vespers came to an end, and the monks trooped out of the chapel. The narrow little edifice, all askew as it was, resembled a hive out of which the bees were swarming in pursuit of spoil. In like manner the brethren were moving towards the refectory. The cellarer, having taken the missive from Kyrill, instructed a monk to escort the messenger to the dining-hall.

Long tables were lined up beneath the low, vaulted ceiling. The woodwork had grown black and the place was so dimly lighted that it was almost dark. Without, visible through the open door, the trees seemed to be wrapped in a white flame. Without, the sun blazed on this summer day while within twilight prevailed. A strong smell of resin, incense, and honey pervaded the room. On a shelf in a corner stood ikons dark as dried blood. They were adorned with nosegays and pussy-willow. But the flowers were withered and lay about like wisps of hay. The ikons were fine ones, probably the work of the Suzdal or Rostov school of craftsmen.

The messenger received a bowl and a spoon, but none of the monks ventured to question him.

Kyrill watched them closely. Much had he heard about Sergei's Troitsa. Here, for the first time, communal life had been introduced, all the brethren pooling their property. On becoming a member of the brotherhood, each had to surrender his private belongings to the monastery. Many other houses had responded to Sergei's appeal to sacrifice the ancient customs of their order. Hitherto each brother had built his own dwelling according to his means and kept house for himself. He lived within the monastic enclosure, and when he died he bequeathed his all to the monastery. Now, however, this was done on entering the community. And the monasteries were sanctuaries to all who needed shelter and protection from the maelstrom of life: waifs and strays who had been forced to abandon hearth and home because these had been devastated by war; old folk bereft of children to support them; youths athirst for knowledge; the destitute populations of a Russia drowned in blood, seared by fire, betrampled by foes. Men flockd to Troitsa from Kiev's ancient friaries, from devastated Ryazan, from Olgerd of Lithuania, from many a town and village. Thus the brotherhood grew. The neighbouring villages often rebelled against Sergei, complaining to the Prince that in a very short while the Troitsa would absorb the meagre revenue from their villages and the fields they had reclaimed at such a cost of labour—the clearings they had made for the making of charcoal, their apiaries, their whole means of livelihood. The Grand Prince turned a deaf ear and continued to grant lands, estates, fishing and trapping rights to

the ever-increasing community. More hands were needed to cultivate the new acquisitions. It was not divine grace but an axe and a plough that the Troitsa offered to those who sought shelter under its roof. When Sergei tonsured the newcomers, he would say:

"Toil, my son. The Lord is merciful to the diligent, to those who are zealous for the monastery's welfare."

And the monks said to the villeins tilling the monastic fields:

"Work for the good of the monastery is like unto prayer before the Lord God. It drops into the same celestial chalice."

No chalice was larger than the one which stood in the Troitsa on Makovets Hill. To this the boyars sent church vessels, family escutcheons, and valuable ornaments for the ikons. They bequeathed whole villages to the monastery so that masses might be said for the repose of their souls. In a few years the Troitsa, with its little church, outshone the more ancient and revered priories.

Kyrill scrutinized his messmates while doing justice to the freshly made cabbage soup and drinking kvass after the main dish.

Some were hirsute, some fair, others corpulent or stunted, young or old. But they all looked at him askance. The erstwhile monk Kyrill knew very well what was in their thoughts. They were envious because he, living as he did in the outside world, was not hungry or enslaved; had a home and wife maybe, which constituted neither a sin nor fornication, but was part of the ordinary life of a layman of which they were deprived. It was only through humility, labour, and renunciation of every desire that they were privileged to sit at board in the monastic refectory.

They, too, had once lived in the world, roaming the countryside, killing, enduring hardships, dreaming, until the time came when they renounced all their hopes and took the vows.

Before Kyrill had time to finish his meal, a brother who glared at him from under stern eyebrows said:

"The reverend father awaits you, soldier."

Kyrill rose and followed the man. Though he had not seen Sergei in the flesh, never a day passed but what he heard about him. All Russia from one end of the land to the other spoke of him, an intimate of the Prince of Moscow, a frequent correspondent of the Patriarch of Byzantium.

The monastery paths were paved with planks, and along these the two men made their way. On either hand the walls pressed closely towards one another as if all around there were no boundless woodland spaces and empty deserts. Passing through a wicket, they entered the garden. That year the apple trees were weighted down with a heavy crop. Hives stored with honey stood in rows under the apple trees while bees were busy at their customary tasks. The apiary at Troitsa took up a great deal of space in the orchard.

"What abundance," cried Kyrill. His heart went pit-a-pat, for he had but recently stepped over the body of a man he had murdered and was now drawing nigh a seer who read the secrets of the soul. Fear stirred in his heart.

At that moment the path took a twist, and on the farther side of a group of currant bushes Kyrill caught sight of Sergei. The brother bowed silently to his companion and withdrew.

With sleeves rolled up, the prior stood by an open hive. Sergei wore no protection as he bent towards the bees. He was thin, well-proportioned, and his sparse reddish beard was tinged with grey. The bees hovered about him, unruffled and droning monotonously, touching neither his face nor his hands. Illuminated by the sun as they swarmed about him, they looked like a halo round

his head. Kyrill felt abashed but he held his ground, standing at a respectful distance in his shining armour, not venturing to approach. It seemed to the soldier that he had known this man for a long time and had often thus stood at his side. Had he not seen a prelate such as this in the form of an ikon? Yet no ikon was like him. Somewhere, he felt, he had spoken with him. But he remembered clearly that it had never fallen to his lot to be in the presence of Sergei. Where had he seen this man before? Kyrill could find no explanation for the feeling that he had met Sergei at some time or other, yet his memory was keen.

There stood Sergei, slight of build, serene, prematurely grey. Was he aware of how far across the world the fame of his meekness, his piety, his wisdom had spread? How it was known that he admonished princes and that he was held in high esteem by boyars and the great in the land? Even Mamai, a khan of the Horde, had questioned Dmitri concerning him.

Sergei glanced round and said:

"Fear not the bees, my son. Come forward boldly."

"God Almighty enlighten me," thought Kyrill. "Where have I heard that voice before?"

He drew nearer, clasping his hands to receive a blessing. Sergei looked him straight in the face as he blessed him. Those grey eyes were kind but searching.

"What did our lord, Dmitri Ivanovich, command you to transmit to me by word of mouth, my son?"

Kyrill lowered his head, and with downcast eyes lied:

"My orders were to bring a written message, holy father. He gave no command by word of mouth."

He lifted his eyes to encounter the same grey steadfast gaze.

"You have not forgotten anything, warrior?"

Gently, though sternly, he was no longer questioning a son but a soldier.

In spite of being somewhat cowed, Kyrill did not flinch. He recalled Dmitri's words to Bobrok on the tower, and replied, looking squarely into Sergei's eyes:

"I guard our Prince's words till my last breath."

"Do you know anything about the Tatars, their whereabouts, their numbers, and why they are marching?"

"I am a mere soldier, reverend father. The princes alone know what is in the wind."

"Are you in the service of the Prince of Moscow? Do you come from Moscow? Has Moscow naught to say about the foe?"

"It is not for a soldier to heed the divergent opinions of civilians, father."

"Surely there can be no difference of opinion about the foe? Anger against him is felt by every Russian."

"Forgive me, reverend father."

"Trust in the mercy of Our Lord and humble your pride in this life. Tempt not the loving kindness of Jesus nor the hearts of men."

"I crave your blessing, father."

Sergei either failed to hear the request or he was absorbed in thought. Anyway, he returned to his bees without giving his blessing. Not knowing whether to take his departure or to await the prior's reply, Kyrill did not budge. He must get some sort of answer for his prince. All said and done, Sergei had been talking to the Prince's messenger. Yet he had given no answer.

Drawn up to his full height, Kyrill continued to stand among the currant bushes, which were now caught in a fierce glow as the evening light gathered

around them. The burnished green of the leaves sparkled while the berries hung like large drops of red-gold from the twigs. Kyrill's armour, too, gleamed in the flaming sunset. His face flushed a dull crimson.

Still he stood without moving while Sergei, not deigning to give him a glance, passed on to another hive and, strolling leisurely between the bushes and hives, disappeared into the distance.

Kyrill clenched his fists in an impulse to rush after His Reverence and wrest an answer from him for the Prince or the reason why an answer was withheld. But Sergei's movements were so unruffled, his hands were folded so tranquilly behind his back, there exuded from his slightly stooping figure so much of gentleness and peace that he seemed to be floating through the golden sunset into some unknown celestial realm. The anger which had raged within Kyrill died down and he felt that he would find no words to question with nor hands for violent action. After all, Sergei was right. It would be better to keep a silent tongue in one's head and flee from this abode of peace.

As Kyrill turned back along the path, he saw that the brother was silently awaiting him behind the currant bushes. For the first time he noticed what a giant of a man the fellow was, even surpassing Kyrill himself in stature and the breadth of his powerful shoulders. If Kyrill, hirsute and slovenly, gave the impression of a monk in armour, the brother, stern and well groomed, seemed like a warrior concealing his identity under a monk's frock.

Without saying a word, he preceded Kyrill along the self-same alleyways of planks between the buildings until they reached a roomy hut not far from the entrance gate.

"Get what sleep you can here, soldier," he said.

"First I must see to my horse."

"Your horse is in the yard."

In the twilight shed, the horse could be heard munching and snuffing hay. Kyrill approached in a businesslike manner to unsaddle the beast. The buckle, tightened by another hand than his, refused to give way. He tore his finger on the iron in an endeavour to extricate the jammed strap of the girth. The brother, who was standing apart, asked:

"What's up, trooper?"

He came nearer as he spoke to see what was amiss. With two fingers he quickly pulled on the buckle, thus releasing the girth so that the saddle slid off the cloth.

"How comes it, soldier, that you cannot undo a simple army buckle?"

"I'm tired, father. But whence have you learned the warrior's craft?"

"I am a novice in this community, but before I came here I knew the sport of war. You seem to me to have scant knowledge of military usage. But this is a fine bit of horseflesh, worthy a warrior."

Kyrill breathed heavily as he packed up the saddle and cloth into a bundle to carry away with him. But the monk stood silent for a while, then smiled to himself and went his way.

After stowing his armour under the saddle-roll to serve as pillow, Kyrill stretched himself on a wide bench in a corner of the room. The events of the day, with all the fatigue and tension which accompanied them, suddenly overwhelmed him and he was soon asleep, sprawling on his back, his arms flung wide as if crushed beneath a weight.

Dreams still bemused his brain, merging into one another, mirroring a strangely bright and peaceful life, when he felt a firm hand upon him ruthlessly dragging him out of sleep into reality.

"Matins are already over, Brother Kyrill, and the brethren are assembling for Mass."

Kyrill saw that the light of day was broadening beyond the open doorway and a joyous ray had pierced through the narrow window. He sat up sprightly, his legs dangling over the edge of the bench.

"Oh, what a night I've had! It's long since I slept so well, father . . . Excuse me, but I don't know your name."

At that it occurred to him to ask himself where, to whom, and when he had mentioned his own name, and how it came about that the brother had addressed him by it.

"Call me Alexander," replied the monk.

"But how do you know my name?"

"Our prior ordered me to call you thus."

"May the Lord save you, father," said Kyrill, setting about his toilet. He rose to his feet and dressed quickly and smartly, in an endeavour to disguise from Alexander the fact that he was not accustomed to armour.

"Has the reverend father prepared an answer for the Grand Prince?" he asked.

"Before dark, he had already set off for Moscow."

"On foot?"

"He invariably walks."

"But when will he get there?"

"Before you do, soldier. He is familiar with trails unknown to any but himself. Pleasant journey to you."

"May the Lord save you, Father Alexander."

"God bless you."

Thus they bade farewell to one another.

The morning sky was radiant and translucent clouds drifted across it. Dense streaks of golden light alternating with the long shadows cast by pine trees lay athwart the walls and roofs of the cells like the striped cloths with which war chargers were caparisoned.

Kyrill entered the refectory, took food for the journey, which he stuffed into his saddle-bags, harnessed his horse, slung the bags across, led his mount outside the gate, said good-bye to the gatekeeper, leaped into the saddle and galloped off.

How gently he had been dismissed! They had allowed him to sleep himself out, had provided food for the journey, had blessed him and wished him good luck. . . . One thought, however, took possession of Kyrill the warrior's mind and oppressed him.

How had Sergei come to know his name?

Kyrill had visited many lands and cities. He had witnessed human suffering. One could read a man's pain, his ways, his difficulties, and at a pinch might even guess his secret thoughts. But the insight Sergei had displayed concerning his own name, Kyrill, which was not a common one, soared far above such conceptions. Putting spurs to his horse, he headed for Moscow by the direct road. He cantered along the bank of the Voria, by-passed a ravine, and heard crows croaking a little distance away.

"Those will be the crows dividing up my soldier," he mused. He had not the slightest compassion for the messenger he had thrown into the ravine.

Before reaching Moscow, and while still in the forest, Kyrill dismounted and led his horse away from the road into a thicker part of the wood. Here he lay down on the grass near a clay mound already trampled by the feet of beasts.

"It is in this place that you sleep, brothers. Our Lord knows what you have suffered. I, too, know your hopes and dreams. I am alone. You would not listen to me, Alis my brother. I do not reproach you for this. But you, too, must everlastingly forgive me for the life which has been granted me."

He lay beside the men who had for so many nights shared the common bunks. Then he rose to his feet and stood staring down to where they lay together without him.

Whither was he to go? The way to Moscow was barred to him. The Grand Prince in Moscow was vigilant. He must find circuitous roads. How many of these roads had he not trudged along in the old days!

He took off his helmet and prayed without haste over the huge clay grave. Kneeling, he prostrated himself to the ground in front of it.

Then he slowly led his horse out on to the road, crossed himself once more, replaced the helmet on his head, and sprang nimbly into the saddle.

Chapter VIII

THE ARMY

MOSCOW STILL SLUMBERED IN THE NIPPING COLD WHICH PRECEDED THE DAWN. Cocks crowed in answer to one another, and, judging by the noise they made, you might imagine that the city was boundless. The suburbs were widely spaced, indeed, for the houses stood far apart and were surrounded by orchards, grass plots, and kitchen-gardens. At certain places the dwellings clustered close to the roadside, thus concealing the lush vegetation of the homesteads. Alongside stretched wattle fences and palisades enclosing gardens in the depths of which a glimpse could be caught now and again of houses and sheds. Foot-paths skirted the walls. The roadways were filled with mud, while the ruts were pitted with potholes or had risen in mounds after the recent rains. Here and there, dingy yellow puddles concealing the depth underneath obstructed the road. But the clouds were packing away to the eastward and the sky was growing light with the radiant shimmer of coming day. The roosters were crowing about some particular land of their own. "Cock-a-doodle-doo."

The road became smoother as it reached the outskirts of the town, for the holes had been filled in with rubble and chips, or any other rubbish that came to hand. The buildings stood closer together and were taller and more ornate. Here and there planks had been laid down as paths for the use of pedestrians.

Five monks were approaching the sleeping town. One of them was gaunt and looked delicate, whilst the others were tall, broad-shouldered, and, were it not for the frocks they wore, might have been taken for hefty soldiers. The hems of their habits were dusty from the road; their rust-coloured boots were caked with mud; their staffs were loaded with sticky clay.

The drowsy guard emerged unwillingly to challenge them.

"At such an hour 'tis more fitting to be abed, reverend fathers."

"For you or for us?" asked a tall monk provocatively.

"Our eyes have to keep open at night, father. Whence come you?"

By this time, lean, grey-haired Sergei had drawn nigh the wranglers.

"In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost!"

The two sentries impetuously fell on their knees.

"Give us your blessing, venerable father."

Sergei made the sign of the cross over their heads.

"God bless you, soldiers! Hold fast to your duties, for the foe is nigh. Get this into your heads: the serpent cometh and the young snakes are ever ready to wriggle in advance. Keep watch over the city, for the hour of trial is shrouded in darkness."

"We do our best, father."

"That is well. May God be with you."

The five men crossed the suburb and reached the barriers outside the Kremlin. Alexander, who had overtaken Sergei at the night's halting-place, stood next to the prior. Sentries crowded the bridges. In the moat the black water was overgrown with rank vegetation, and though the walls of the stronghold had but recently been whitewashed they were already rusted and covered with mildew at the base. The soldiers on the bridge peered down into the moat, where tradesmen, having nothing better to do, had cast their lines in the hope of a bite.

"Nothing doing in the way of carp. The water's too choked with weeds."

"Ay, but that's the stuff for them. They like darkness."

"Look! Look! There's one nibbling."

A soldier slipped helter-skelter down to the line and hauled on it before the fisherman was given a chance.

Up the line shot with the catch glistening in the air. A chorus of laughter drowned the voices at the moat.

"A frog!"

"He's hooked a frog!"

The owner of the rod fiercely abused the soldier:

"The devil must have sent you here. What's the idea of meddling with another man's line?"

"And if you had landed the catch yourself, would it have been a white fish?"

"Why not?"

A quarrel was in the making when suddenly a hush came over the scene. A bare-headed fisherman, his wet trousers rolled up and his shirt open at the neck, scrambled to where his little son was sitting on a short coat such as is usually worn by peasants. Seizing the urchin by the hand, he dragged him to the bridge, making all speed to overtake the soldiers. From every side the guards were running to receive Sergei's blessing.

"Father Sergei, please bless my boy."

"May the blessing of Father, Son, and Holy Ghost fall upon you, little son. Grow to be a big man, not to become a slave of the Horde, but to rejoice Russia. I bless you. May your motherland be purged of the alien yoke. Only after having thrown off this yoke can the people rise in joy and achieve greatness. The hour of combat is at hand. But you, my little son, have your life to live in the future, and it is bright."

The boy gazed up at Sergei with frightened brown eyes while the prior bent down to caress and kiss him. Sergei knew that every word, every gesture of his, would be reported throughout the city and even spread abroad without the town.

No one was allowed into the Kremlin so early. The iron-studded gates were shut. Yet at Sergei's approach they swung wide, growling furiously on their hinges. No prince would have been allowed to enter without much questioning and reporting to superiors. Meanwhile, he would have had to stay outside the walls. Sergei, however, went unhindered throughout the whole of Russia. Princes might quarrel, town rise against town, but no one in Russia,

whoever he might be, would dispute the authority of the Church. The power of the Metropolitan extended over the whole of Russia, even unto the Horde where Christians lived in the Tatar camps. Metropolitan Alexei had asked Sergei to assume his holy office. Everyone knew that, but no one could understand why the holy man had refused the dignity. Sergei did not act a part. He did not affect a humility greater than he felt, like some who lived in palaces of stone and went about in bast-soled shoes and a rope as a girdle.

During the whole of the year dissension had been rife at the Metropolitan's palace, for no sooner had Alexei breathed his last than disputes arose regarding his successor.

Prince Dmitri needed a candidate of his own choosing who would adhere to the dictates of Moscow and in the name of the Church would be the mouthpiece of those dictates so far as the Russian princes were concerned. He had earnestly endeavoured to persuade Sergei to accept the office. But Sergei replied:

"No, no, my lord. In faith I seek for peace, not in power. Tempt me not."

Then Dmitri suggested another man, Mitiai, a priest of Kolumna. But Alexei would have none of him.

"He is too ignorant of the temptations that lie in the path, for he has not been tested by monastic life. I cannot raise him to the episcopate."

After Alexei's death Dmitri acted on his own initiative and received Mitiai, who took up his quarters in the Metropolitan's palace. He arrayed himself in archiepiscopal robes and extended his authority over the neighbouring bishops and those farther afield.

But investiture to the All-Russian Metropolitan See was in the hands of the Patriarch at Constantinople. On him depended both the choice and the blessing. Mitiai became apprehensive. There were rivals in the field. Dionisi of Suzdal was on his way to Constantinople, hoping to win the Patriarch's favour. Cyprian waited in Kiev. He had already received the Patriarch's blessing. Though a Serb by birth, the Lithuanians chose him as their candidate in the hope of thus bringing the whole Russian Church under their dominion.

Mihail Mitiai was Dmitri's confessor and scribe. Furthermore, he acted as archimandrite of the Spaski monastery. As time went by his anxiety grew accordingly, and he felt that he must go to Constantinople to receive his investiture from the hands of the Patriarch so as to render his rivals powerless.

Sergei disliked Mitiai. True, he was well read, a good preacher, attractive, but not a pastor of the Church, not an intercessor before God. He was a man of the world, and useful to Dmitri.

Sergei knew that every word he uttered, every step he took this day, would reach Mitiai's ears. He entered the Chudov monastery. Matins were just ending. He stayed in the porch praying among the beggars and the infirm. Then he stepped noiselessly to where Alexei lay buried, knelt beside the tomb, and remained there until the service came to a conclusion.

Dmitri met him in the garden, advanced to greet him, craved his blessing, and led him to a seat.

"I could not understand your messenger, my lord. It was only on the way hither that I learnt about the Tatars."

"I gave him special orders and Brenko gave him his instructions verbally: 'Tell the reverend father that the foe is mighty, the trials awaiting us are heavy, the bloodshed will be terrible. Nizhni-Novgorod has been burned to the ground and trampled underfoot. The people have gone into hiding in the forest. Prince Dmitri Constantinovich has withdrawn to Suzdal. The calamity which has befallen them is great, but a yet greater one is approaching us. A

countless host of Tatars is advancing into our territory. We have done much to prepare ourselves for this event, but the coming day has not been revealed to us.' I implore you, Father, to defend us with your prayers, to enlighten and support us by your advice."

Both men rose.

"It is not I but God alone who can enlighten and support you. He Himself is your defence. Turn to Him. My prayers and thoughts will be for you and with you constantly."

Sergei showed Dmitri a letter.

"I received this and was on the point of coming to you when your messenger arrived. Cyprian is on his way from Kiev to Moscow. He has been elected by the Patriarch. If and when he reaches Moscow, there will be no other Metropolitan than he for the Russian Church. The Patriarch will say: 'I have raised Cyprian. Harken unto him.'"

"Yes, he will dwell in Moscow, but will give ear to Lithuania."

"True enough. But for the moment he is humble. Listen to what he writes to me, a sinner. 'I have heard of you and your virtues, for which I devoutly thank God. And I pray Him He may deem us worthy to meet one another and find enjoyment in spiritual intercourse.'"

"Sweet as a nightingale's warbling."

"The magpie imitates forty different bird-songs, mingling them so as to weave a mesh in which to snare the feathered folk. A bird thinks its mate is calling and falls a prey to the false songster. The magpie interrupts its song to pounce upon and tear the deluded victim to pieces. Thus do these dulcet words strike me."

"And me too."

"Cyprian writes further: 'Be it known to you that I arrived in Liubutsk on Thursday the third day of June, and am going to Moscow, where I shall see my son, the Grand Prince.'"

"The alluring song issues from the hawk's beak to my understanding."

"Listen to this. Here he shows his claws. 'I am a prelate, not a fighting man. I come with a blessing, and like Our Lord when He sent forth His disciples to preach, saying: "Whosoever receiveth you, receiveth me likewise."'"

"He is merely on his way to Moscow, and yet already hints that he who shows himself to be an opponent is likewise an opponent of God. I'll take that sin upon me!"

Dmitri summoned a soldier and ordered him to call Brenko.

"What are your intentions, my lord?"

"I shall not ask a blessing of you, father, for I wish to shoulder whatever sin there is myself alone."

Sergei smiled.

Brenko had been awaiting Dmitri's summons indoors, and now hastened down into the garden.

"Here's how matters stand. Metropolitan Cyprian is on his way to Moscow. He dispatched a letter from Liubutsk. His retainers and servants are accompanying him. There is no time to be lost. See that he is met. Choose stern men and tell them to pay him such deference that he will be at a loss to know where to lie or sit. Understand?"

"How now, Prince, seeing that he has received his investiture from the Patriarch himself?"

"I am sending gifts to the Patriarch. Were it not for me, the Patriarch's palace in Constantinople would sparkle with holes instead of presents. Byzan-

tium boasts of her old eagle, but sits tight on my money. For years we have paid allegiance in solid coin, in furs, gold, and wares. Yet they would have us continue as of yore, imposing prelates of their choice without consulting me. When they get wind of the kind of reception we have given Cyprian, even the Patriarch will become more civil."

"Oh, my lord," Sergei remonstrated, "in speaking thus lightly of our Patriarch you are, indeed, taking upon yourself a great sin."

"Forgive me, Father Sergei. If I sin in this I shall make atonement to God by some other means. Off with you, Brenko, do not tarry."

"I could send Commander Nikifor, but he has a foul temper and is heavy-handed and brutal."

"Just the man we want, Brenko."

"Might he not overdo things?"

"If he does, he'll have to answer before God for his action. Tell him to encounter Cyprian right harshly, and let the measure of his harshness be his own sin."

"As you will, Dmitri Ivanovich."

"Hold awhile. What messenger did you send to Father Sergei? The man told nothing by word of mouth and behaved insolently. Who was he?"

"A well-drilled soldier was dispatched. I myself gave him his instructions. His name is Simeon. He has not got back yet. I'll find out after his return."

"But why isn't he back?"

"Perhaps he's got drunk, as soldiers are apt to do."

"A soldier has no business to drink more than is good for him when duty calls."

"I'll find out, Dmitri Ivanovich."

At that moment a blare of trumpets filled the garden. Discordant voices of men, the rumbling of a human crowd, the frenzied cry of a woman, other women's screams. A girl started to cry hysterically, but her voice was drowned in the merry laughter of men. Above the din rose the powerful young voice of the leading singer:

"Ay, 'tis not a great eagle a-spreading its wings . . ."

The trumpets ceased. The vast multitude of human beings caught up the song, and its great volume soared away out of the Kremlin gates, past the princely dwellings, past gardens, churches, and the narrow alleyways of the city into the untrodden spaces beyond. . . .

"Ay, 'tis not a great eagle a-spreading its wings,
Not a thundercloud a-rising . . ."

"They've started!" cried Dmitri, as he crossed himself.

He moved towards the palace with Sergei at his side and Brenko leading the way.

"Where is the service to be held?" inquired Sergei.

"In the field beyond the town walls. Everything has been made ready there," answered Brenko.

"Permit me to drive you to the place," suggested Dmitri.

"Many thanks, Lord Dmitri Ivanovich. I prefer to walk along with these"—and he pointed to the crowd which had gathered outside the wall.

"You'll be jostled no end, father," Brenko warned him.

"I do not fear men, Mihail Andreich."

"We would not venture to press you, father," said Dmitri soothingly.

Sergei made speed to join the troops, which poured along like an unleashed torrent. They bumped into one another as they thronged through the gateway. Here and there among this avalanche of partially armed soldiers rose the figures of officers on horseback. They wore full battle kit. There was a flashing of iron and a blue glint of steel. Foot soldiers carried spears on their shoulders. Swords dangled from their waists. Over their homespun tunics dark leathern straps held their shields and armour in place. They wore new, bast-soled footgear which squeaked as they strode along, and their tread was muffled as if they were marching on woodland grass and not on city streets. The men were carried away by the singing. A light breeze stirred their hair, which was as fair as a child's. Russian troops are flaxen-haired, though there are dark heads and a sprinkling of auburn-haired lads to be seen. The timbre of the voices also varied, but the song was the same.

"Moscow's Grand Prince is a-rising,
He is rousing his foot soldiers,
He is rousing his valiant horsemen,
Glory, glory, glory . . ."

Sergei quitted the courtyard and was swallowed up in the crowd. Those nearest him recognized him, but they did not interrupt the song, and he kept pace with them, listening intently and silently to their singing. Each one felt himself immune to the enemy's sword, felt that he personally would escape the feathered arrow of the infidel. But Sergei knew that few would return singing; many would come back with groans and tears, and many would never return at all.

The army was marching, marching into unknown spaces to meet an alien foe, marching for the sake of Russia, for the sake of their towns and villages, each man for his own small happiness and for his own great country.

Thus they marched, thousands upon thousands of men, through the city of Moscow, while the citizens thronged the walls. These streets would not be seeing them for many a day. Without pausing in their song, they turned for a last look at their own alleyways, their own streets, their homes, whence came answering wails and cries.

Tramp, tramp, tramp—there seemed to be no end to their numbers as they marched to meet the foe, the storms and tempests, the arrows and Moslem swords which awaited them.

In a smooth green meadow in sight of Moscow, on the fringe of the dark blue forest, young birches grew in a circle, their tender green leaves softly shimmering in the sunlight. In the shade stood a table with a bowl of water upon it, a New Testament, and a gold crucifix. Holding crosses in their hands, the bishops, archimandrites, and other clergy awaited the arrival of the army.

The troops came to a halt.

The service was not long.

As if he wished to tarnish the azure sky with a brush, the self-appointed Metropolitan, Archbishop Mihail Mitiai, flourished the holy-water sprinkler while the choir intoned the hymn beginning "Long life" in honour of those whose life here below numbered but a few short days.

When Sergei stepped out of the ranks and walked towards the princes of the Church a great stillness fell. The singing ceased, and the clergy in their vestments of gold bowed to him, the mud-stained monk.

He stood in front of the troops. Then, making the sign of the cross over them, he pronounced a blessing.

"May Our Lord help you."

Sergei bowed low and the soldiers responded with a deep reverence.

His simple words, his cassock and grey hair, powdered as they were with the dust of the road, his stern and soul-penetrating gaze reassured them far better than the glitter of gold, the prayers, and the holy water from the group around Mitiai.

Mitiai shot a haughty glance in Sergei's direction, but the monk had already turned his steps citywards and skirted the army, which was once again on the move. Dmitri, surrounded by his princes, boyars, and commanders, took the march past. He sat erect on his tall white charger. His gilded armour sparkled like a flame and his helmet rose above all others. By rights, he should have been wearing the cap which was part of the Grand Prince's regalia, but he was speeding off his troops as a warrior, not in his capacity of Prince. He watched them file past with an experienced eye, for he wished to discern how they would behave when at long last they should arrive at their destination.

After the review of the many thousands of his men, he bade farewell to the commanders and boyars who were to accompany the troops. He had to remain in Moscow in order to hand over the care of his family and the city to a trusty retainer. Next morning he intended to follow in the wake of his troops.

As he returned to the city he faced the oncoming stream of men, who stopped singing and twisted their necks to look at his retreating figure.

Chapter IX

THE FOREST

KYRILL PASSED BY CIRCUITOUS PATHS IN ORDER TO AVOID MOSCOW.

The pine-clad dales were silent. For miles around the age-old firs kept guard over the peace. Darkness reigned beneath their austere branches. Neither grass nor brushwood grew in the deep forest. It was only beside storm-tossed trees and fallen trunks, or on the steep banks of solitary streams, that the green grass sprouted, the flowers bloomed, and the birds reared their young. In such spots a ray of sunshine pierced the gloom at high noon. Here Kyrill fed his horse and foraged for some sort of a meal for himself. His stock of food was running low, and the time had come for him to emerge from concealment and seek the haunts of men. Fear still gripped him. How far had he managed to by-pass Moscow, and whom would he chance upon once outside the wood? All manner of men people the earth. Nowadays man was an enemy to man. In times of yore, so he had heard, folk were simpler and more kind-hearted. Now they had grown savage. Could it be the Tatars who had poured gall into the Russian soul? Or was it the harshness of the age?

One day, halting in a narrow glen thickly swathed with wild currant bushes and raspberry canes, Kyrill left his horse to graze and began to pick some raspberries. The berries, though scarce, were large and succulent. He pushed through the prickly, brittle canes, which cracked slightly under his feet.

Of a sudden, coming from the direction towards which he was making and where the bushes were unusually tangled, his ears caught the sound of rustling and snapping.

Two beasts of a brownish colour bounded out of the thicket and, dodging the aged tree-boles, scampered away.

"Are they bears?" thought Kyrill. "No, they're too cautious for that."

They obviously feared him, so Kyrill himself had nothing to be afraid of any longer. He pursued them, determined not to let them escape. They were men, he discovered, as he caught up with one of them.

Running towards the fugitive, he gave the man a shove in the back. The fellow threw up his hands, tripped, and fell to his knees. Kyrill bestraddled him and held him down with his hands over his captive's ears. Then he took a swift look around. How far had the other gone? But the second runaway stood quite near, grunting and swaying from side to side.

At the sight, Kyrill marvelled. The other one was a bear. Kyrill was so surprised that he forgot the man beneath him, but just sat on him and stared at the vision. The startled creature grunted while slaver dribbled from its snout. Kyrill saw a ring dangling from the bear's nostrils. This gave him his cue at once. He turned his adversary over and peered into his face.

The young fellow was a peasant, fair-haired, grey-eyed, and very pale. Handsome enough had he colour in his cheeks, but now he looked ridiculous and pitiable, so white was he with fear.

"What are you up to here in the forest, eh?"

The lad made no reply, merely blinking his eyes.

"Lost your tongue?"

The peasant licked his dry lips.

"Come on, speak, or I'll make an end of you."

His eyes drowned in womanish tears, the yokel replied:

"Let me be, little father, let me be! Don't kill me!"

"Where do you come from?"

"Moscow."

"Going far?"

"To the Oka."

"What's your business there?"

"I've got a bear on show. It dances."

"Why did you take to the woods?"

"A traveller on the road risks a hiding. It's quieter going in the woods."

"Well, you've been caught here all right."

"Oh, don't, little father, please don't . . ."

"Why are you making for the Oka?"

"I live there, near Kolomna."

"Then you're bringing money home from Moscow?"

"Oh, please, little father, let me go. My family are without food or shelter. Let me go, brother."

"I've not yet decided whether to let you go or not."

"Oh, please let me go, brother."

"Verily, I know not what to do . . ."

"Oh, brother . . ."

"Have you much money on you?"

"Oh no!"

"Were you long in Moscow?"

"About three months."

"Aha! That means there's money. Where's your pouch?"

"Oh, please let me go."

"How comes it that you travel through the forest unarmed?"

"I've got the bear, so there's nothing to fear."

"He's not much help. Just look where he stands."

The peasant craned his neck from under Kyrill's grip and did as he was told. Though too afraid to draw near, the bear had raised himself on to his hind legs and was padding out the measure of a dance.

"The curse of Cain be upon you!"

Kyrill towered over the youngster and said:

"All right, then. Get up with you."

The peasant looked up in surprise.

"What's the matter now?"

"I've changed my mind about throttling you. I'll take you along with me alive instead."

"To Moscow?"

"You seem pretty startled at the idea."

"Better make an end of me here."

"Why, what the devil have you been up to there?"

"Well, I . . ."

Kyrill squeezed him anew.

"Oh, little father, let me go and I'll tell you."

"Well?"

"After the show was over among the booths in the market-place, I was on my way home with my bear when, in the evening, I put through another bit of business in an alley . . ."

"Yes, yes. What sort of business?"

"Just . . . a . . . small . . ."

"A small what?"

"I'll tell you—I'll tell you. Knifed a merchant and took all he had . . ."

"Much?"

"So, so . . ."

"Eh?"

"All there was."

"Will you go shares?"

"Let me free first."

"Well, you'd better be careful, my lad. A promise is a promise."

Kyrill stood up, while the peasant wriggled to his feet, straightened, and then started to run off. But Kyrill soon grappled him and sent the youngster sprawling on the ground.

"So that's your game, is it! And me all ready to believe you and enrol you in my band."

"Would you really?"

"That was my intention. But now I see you're a deceitful beggar."

"Take me on. You won't regret it."

"Very well, then. Get up."

The youth rose and hesitantly began to speak.

"Over there in the raspberry scrub . . . the pouch . . . Shall we go and pick it up? Satisfied with half?"

"Won't that leave too much for yourself?"

"No, let's share and share alike."

"We'll take a look at the bag first."

They returned to the thicket. In a trampled low hollow among the canes lay a pouch and an iron crutch. Food, too. They counted out the prize.

Not so poor a haul. The merchant had done pretty good business on the last day of his life.

"How did you manage to make good your escape?"

"Who would think of holding up a man with a performing bear? A common thief risks being taken, but such as we have freedom of entry even into the Prince's dwelling to sing there."

"Mm. Was this your first effort?"

"Yes. In earlier times I just played a prank or two if somebody came my way."

"Got off with it?"

"Once I was nearly nabbed, but I shifted the blame on to my bear. 'He's a bit of a trouble at times,' says I. 'I'm a decent sort of a fellow.'"

"You've a sense of humour, I see."

"Well, I did not feel any too cheerful when you pinned me down."

"Going to run away again?"

The lad mused awhile. Then he said, with a smile:

"I'll tell you the truth as if to my own father. As I was walking along, it struck me that I'd like to have a friend, someone I could live with in close friendship all my life."

"It remains to be seen what sort of a friend you'll make."

"I won't fail you."

The two men set off together.

At the start the horse was rather frightened of the bear, glancing askance at it, snorting, and pricking up its ears. But when he had sniffed awhile and got accustomed to the smell he quietened down. The bear was a tame one. It had never been baited or teased as a cub. It was more like a cat, wheedling up to man and absorbing some of his warmth.

When they came to a halt and Kyrill had tethered his horse to graze, they sat down to partake of a meal. The bear, feeling bored, nudged its master under the elbow with its snout. Its master threw it a chunk of bread.

"There now, you old rascal!"

Again the bear poked at his elbow.

"You just stop that. He's asking me to play to him," he explained to Kyrill.

"What's your name?"

"Timoshei."

"Well, then, Timoshei, play to your pet."

"I can do that all right, but I'm afraid you'll laugh at me."

"What's the good of being able to play if it is a sin to laugh?"

"Just as you like."

Timoshei produced his instrument. A sweet, caressing melody, long drawn out, floated on the air as though someone very far away were gently singing.

It was most pleasant to the ear, coming back to the listener from the depths of the forest. The horse nibbled the pasture near by. The bear began to tread a measure, now drawing in his hind legs, now waving his paws.

"He's been well trained," Kyrill thought.

But the beast, as though wearied by the dance, ambled up to its master and lay down at his feet. Timoshei propped his feet against it and, interrupting the music, turned to Kyrill, remarking:

"Maybe you'd like to hear a lay of olden times—a true one at that."

"Let's hear it."

"I'll give you a new one I learned when in Moscow."

"I'm all ears."

Timoshei intoned the ancient ballad about Prince Vladimir, telling of the dispute among the guests at the feast, the boasts of the valiant warriors, with which Kyrill was well acquainted. Yet every time he heard the old melody it stirred memories of wide, open spaces, of endless stretches of unfamiliar roads, and of the boundless freedom of the land of dreams. Suddenly, new words, angry and plaintive, broke into the description of the feast:

"With sudden rage Tsar Kalin now was filled,
 Destroy he would the sov'reign Kiev town,
 The peasant rabble he said must be killed,
 And palaces and dwellings all burned down
 Struck from its trunk would Vladimir's head be,
 And golden-haired Opraksia must lie in his own bed . . ."

Timoshei paused to explain to Kyrill:

"You see, he meant to add our Russian land to his own. Understand?"

"Go on with your singing. I understand."

"King Kalin sent a liegeman to Kiev city:
 Enter thou shalt into the great stone hall,
 Shalt kick the doors apart without a sign of pity,
 To doff thine helmet thou shalt have no call;
 Before Prince Vladimir shalt proudly stand,
 And silently the scroll upon the table place . . ."

Again Timoshei stopped to explain:

"He even forbids his herald to bow before the Russian Prince. He struts high, doesn't he, the infidel dog?"

"Listen to me," said Kyrill, abruptly interrupting. "Did you hear nothing about the Tatars while you were in Moscow?"

"Who has not? They are marching on the city. Had it not been for the bustle and excitement I could not have knocked that merchant down so easily."

"What's afoot there?"

"The Tatars are coming—hosts of them. Dmitri Ivanovich is rallying the people, fitting out regiments. It's some days since I left. I expect they've started by now."

"Which way did they go?"

"Same as we, towards the Oka. That is why I chose a cross-country path."

"Not your only reason?"

"Maybe you are right—it was not the only one."

"How big's our force?"

"Not very large, I heard, but there are no end of weapons. And they would seem to be of quite a new kind—German or Swedish. We've never had the likes of them before."

"Why didn't you pinch some?"

Timoshei laughed.

"I tried to wheedle some out of him. 'Lord Dmitri Ivanovich,' says I, 'couldn't I equip my bear? He's been trained to beat Tatars.' Dmitri Ivanovich just laughed and said: 'Our bears will soon be capturing such Tatars in the woods with their naked paws.'"

"Is it long since you've seen him?"

"Not so very long. I gave a show in the courtyard of his palace on Thursday morning. The Princess came out on to the porch. 'This is no time for amusement, Timoshei,' says she. 'We should all be at our prayers at such a moment.'

The Prince himself stood near by watching arms taken from the cellar loaded on to carts. Looks as if there had been no room for them in the armoury. P'raps it has been stowed away secretly awaiting the proper hour . . . Ah, but he's a benevolent Prince!"

"You know best."

"Do you think otherwise?"

Kyrill made no comment.

The horse snuffed among the grass. The bear dozed peacefully at Timoshei's feet. Evening closed in. This was to be their last night in the forest. They decided to push forward to the road next morning.

"Won't you give us a bit more of the song?"

"Why not? The lay is very appropriate."

He sang of how Kalin demanded that Vladimir should provide food and drink for the Tatar armies:

"Place potent honey-mead in all thy streets,
In all the city's lanes and alley-ways,
So cask on cask within the city meets,
Cask to cask, hoop to hoop. . . ."

He then sang of how swiftly passed the stipulated days for fulfilling the conditions:

"Day followed day as rain that falls,
And like a river flowed the weeks. . . ."

He sang of how, instead of an answer, Vladimir sent the champion warrior, Ilya Muromets, to Kalin. How Ilya saddled his charger, set forth on his mission, and saw the Tatar hosts:

"When he gazed on the Tatar troops,
He saw a mighty force in camp.
Shouts, and whistling men in groups,
Neighing from steeds and horses' stamp,
Made sad his stalwart peasant heart,
And fear ran through the Christian land. . . ."

For a long time he described how Ilya gathered up his strength.

The forest brooded in silence while the dreamy voice wove the web of words. Now the voice took on a more wrathful tone, and the rhythm of the song became increasingly precise and stern. It seemed as if the words under a weight of armour were marching, rank after rank, along the forest paths to encounter the foe.

Kyrill became pensive as he listened. At this very hour Russian men were again advancing to meet another Tsar Kalin. It was not Ilya but Dmitri who was leading them to this terrific battle. Never yet had the Tatars suffered defeat; but many had been vanquished by them. Russian bones lay rotting in the damp earth. Again the men-at-arms were setting forth, only again to be mown down. Could Dmitri conquer where others had been unable to conquer the Tatars?

"Dmitri, Dmitri, cruel indeed is your heart and loathsome!"

It was still Kyrill's habit to transmute every strong emotion into prayer. No sooner was a desire conceived than a prayer to God was born. How could he pray now? If he prayed for victory over the Tatars, Dmitri would reap the

renown and become exalted. None would there be to equal him. A complacent smirk would dimple his rotund cheeks and play about his lips. All would praise him. No! Let him suffer defeat, be destroyed and humbled. Let him return so wan and pale that he will feel ashamed to show himself before his people. Ay, but what would happen then to the people? By fire and sword Russia would dissolve in weeping and for ever after lie prostrate beneath the oppression of the infidel. Moscow, Kolomna, and Ryazan, as so often before, would be reduced to ashes. Yet it was to Kolomna that he was carrying his dream of a free and happy life. His dream, too, would be scattered like ashes in the wind.

"Grant, O Lord, success on the field of battle. Spread Thy sheltering hand over our forces. Grant us victory . . ."

Timoshei's voice grew in volume to embrace the whole world of the hushed eventide. It rang out triumphant, as though the singer glimpsed through the gathering darkness a glow invisible to any eyes but his. Ilya hurled himself on the infidel host:

"He pierced with his spear, and crushed them with his steed,
He scythed their forces down like corn at harvest-time. . . ."

When his charger grew weary and his sword blunted, Ilya threw away his weapons:

"A stalwart stripling struts towards him.
Seizing the Tatar by the feet,
To and fro with violence grim
Tatar 'gainst Tatar the great athlete
Swung him till he passed through
The cursèd Horde to meet the tsar,
Kalin the cur. Then aside he threw
The youth. By his white hands he seized the tsar:
'For everlasting ages thou shalt pay,
O infidel, to us, and tribute shalt thou send
To Kiev city . . ."

"I have never heard this lay before," commented Kyrill. "But it's good!"

"Neither have I. But it should be sung in honour of Dmitri and Moscow, not of Vladimir and Kiev. It would sound fiercer."

"I don't agree. It's good as it is. Anybody can understand that Vladimir refers to us and Kalin to the Tatars. None can wish him well. As to Dmitri—there may be men who bear him a grudge."

"You're holding something back. You don't seem to like Dmitri."

"No, I don't like him. But just now that's neither here nor there. We'll think about it at a later date. It's a sin to think badly of him just now and a twofold sin to speak ill of him. Understand?"

In the morning they shook up the bear, which was wet with dew. Kyrill untethered his horse. The fog had not yet lifted, so that they groped their way as best they could by peering at the foot of the pines where the mist was thinner.

They emerged on to the road in the afternoon, but though it was deserted they went in fear. So, re-entering the wood, they took a path that ran parallel to the highway where they were hidden from any passer-by.

As the day waned they came in sight of the Oka. The sky was overcast. It drizzled. Heavy drops rolled off the branches. The trees now were not so large. Then the forest became dense again. Here there were oaks and aspens.

Red-capped toadstools rested sturdily on their white stalks. The bear ate them greedily.

"Silly old booby, you'll get the belly-ache!" cried Timoshei. But the beast merely licked its chops.

The two friends decided to enter the town separately in order not to excite suspicion.

Timoshei took the lead with the bear, while Kyrill lagged in the rear.

Taking his horse by the bridle, he sauntered through the woods till he caught sight of the town between the branches of the trees.

It looked a smallish place, standing on the far side of ploughed fields. The rain made it appear dark and grey. Rising above the thatched or deal-roofed houses of the suburb towered the stronghold, with its log walls and its stubby, owl-like barbicans.

A gilt cross crowned the Church of the Resurrection. Here Dmitri had been married to Princess Evdokia of Suzdal. Though Kyrill remembered the church well, he had not seen it for a long time. Many were the sorrows he had suffered since he had last crossed its threshold. A short distance away, among a grove of oaks, stood the Golutvin monastery, whither he had been led to a life of bondage. Might not the widow, Aniuta, still be living at the confluence of the Moskva and Oka?

"She can have no inkling of how near I am," thought Kyrill. "Yet she cannot have forgotten how she shouldered the guilt herself, imploring the guards to release me. 'Had I known, I'd not have put in my complaint,' she had said. 'I'd never have betrayed a man to his disgrace, but have kept silent.' The bitter grief she felt . . . Nothing but a wanton, true. But her heart was in the right place. Perhaps she was not such a wanton as I took her to be?"

Would he have hastened to this place through bogs and forests if he had not preserved a soft spot in his heart for the Oka and Kolomna and the riverside trees and the lonely willow grove where he had made love to her?

The love-making had been so bashful on her part. It was quite pathetic. Are harlots like that? Slander comes so easily to most people. As to her demands for money, her cupidity . . . well, there was not really much in that when one considers how hard life is for a widow.

Kyrill stood in the brushwood looking round for a suitable tree. When he had found one he went up to it. Moss grew thickly about its roots. He stuck his dagger into the moss and lifted up a large layer, underneath which was a store of nuts. Surprised, he took one, wiped his fingers and broke it with his teeth. The kernel was fresh. "Well, well, a squirrel has made his store here, I'll do the same." He dug a hole with his dagger, took off his mail, helmet and unnecessary kit and made them into a bundle, which he stowed into a crevice between the roots. He covered it over with moss and took a good look at his work.

"Just moss like any other moss. A little mound. Nobody will guess . . ."

He thought of taking off his ring, but could not be bothered opening up the cache again.

Now he was dressed lightly and simply. The only arms he had kept were the dagger at his belt and the knife stuck into his boot. He might be taken for a freelance or a trusted clerk or perhaps even a merchant in such disguise. The cap alone was out of keeping. He had worn the same cap while working with Alis. It was much the worse for wear and bedaubed with paint.

By now it was quite dark, for the rain had early snuffed out the daylight. Kyrill hurried on his way.

Dogs barked in the town. From the gardens and yards came the smell of manure, pot-herbs, and dampness. The wooden walls of the houses were covered with dark, dank patches.

Swallows, their white breasts a gleam, skimmed the ground. By a light in the window Kyrill recognized a wayside inn. Here on the outskirts, without approaching the town gates, he stopped to spend the night.

Inside the large cottage it was murky and quiet. A chip-lamp cast a dim glow not far from the table. Its flame resembled a drooping flower seared at the top. Flames invariably reminded Kyrill of a certain flower which grew on the shores of the Bosphorus. But the sight of broad-faced Slavs sitting silently on a bench along the wall filled him with apprehension. One among them might have witnessed his ignominious exit from Kolomna two years ago. All eyes glared at him, but no one moved. He crossed himself and sat down in a corner.

It did not take him many minutes to realize why such general silence prevailed. By the stove an old man slumped on a stump of wood drinking kvass from a ladle with a long handle to it. The company had been listening to a minstrel. Kyrill had made his entry during an interlude. Ilya, having saddled his charger, had ridden forth into the open country to meet his adversary. The same ballad about Ilya and Kalin, only in a new version, met Kyrill for a second time. It had, therefore, already spread to the wilds of the forests and to this inn.

The old man put the ladle on the cask and, turning to Kyrill, said:

"The song I am singing is about Ilya and Alin. Listen to it, kind guest."

"Kind guest, indeed," thought Kyrill. "He must be taking me for a merchant!"

While the old man wiped the hair around his mouth preparatory to resuming his narrative, Kyrill nudged a small boy who sat at his feet.

"Here, lad, go and see to my horse," he ordered.

The boy sprang up in hasty obedience, while Kyrill said to himself:

"Just as well they should take me for a merchant."

He looked around to discover who might be the host, for he wanted some food. But none of those present seemed a likely personage. The old man addressed him again:

"Listen awhile, then we'll eat together."

"Sing away, father. I'll wait your convenience."

This old man proved to be the host. He sang slowly and clearly to the end. He cut it short, excluding Ilya's threefold attack and thus imparting greater power to the incidents so that they appeared to be like a rapier-thrust.

"In the version I heard, Ilya fought with Kalin and not with Alin," interpolated Kyrill.

"It doesn't matter what you call him, it's all the same, he's a Tatar. How long is it since you heard this lay?"

"Yesterday, for the first time."

"Ah, I was thinking maybe you'd heard it some time ago. There's no song that I haven't heard."

"You like singing?"

"Well, one has to entertain travellers. It's my livelihood."

"Then entertain me—if any food's to be found on the premises."

"Be patient a little while. My old woman is milking the cows."

The guests livened up.

"A fine song," said one of them.

"There's not a man born who can beat the Tatars. If we couldn't do it at the start, we haven't got the strength to do it now," observed a white-eyed swarthy fellow dubiously.

"You must be blind. Haven't you seen the army?"

"The army is far from being a small one. Our guest yonder will be scooping up rubles aplenty."

"What with?" inquired Kyrill.

"I merely said you'd scoop up rubles. Surely that's why you've come chasing along in the rear of the troops?"

"And what makes you take me for a merchant?"

"Your bearing and your speech made that plain. Do you think we've never met quality before? One thing I can tell you: people of your calling are as thick over there as in the market-place at Moscow, so you are by no means the first in the field."

"Are there really many?"

"A merchant always lies in wait for the reek of blood. When there's fighting, rubles fly about like mad. All the same, a man has to die."

Kyrill watched the gathering attentively. Where could men of their sort be making for at such a time as the present? One, in particular, looked like a thief and a rogue. His eyes were shifty, he sat in a dark corner like an owl to avoid the light. His small, pointed beard failed to conceal the knave in him. When he noticed Kyrill's eyes fixed upon him he started to yawn and passed his hand over his open mouth.

"Trying to throw dust in my eyes," thought Kyrill.

"Have you far to go, brothers?" he asked.

"To Zvenigorod for the fair."

"A long way to be going."

Said another:

"We're to make pics—that's our job."

"Pies filled with tripe, aren't they?" Kyrill's remark was pointedly addressed to the man who held aloof in the dark corner.

But the man merely wiped the sweat from his face and then answered leisurely as though he were taking Kyrill's side:

"Who can tell? Maybe we'll stuff 'em with cabbages. They're an ignorant lot out there."

"He's got out of it neatly," thought Kyrill, and said aloud:

"And what about yourself? Will you be for stoking the ovens to bake the pies?"

"I'm on my own."

"There's profit to be made by that, too," Kyrill agreed. "Especially if one keeps the stuffing!"

But the swarthy fellow leered at the man who was deliberately holding himself aloof and there was an evil expression in his eyes.

"Seems as if he reckons to stuff pie with pie, but hasn't the guts to do it."

There was no longer any doubt in Kyrill's mind. The troops had passed and the merchants were following them to rake in the flying rubles. These men were trailing the merchants to fleece them in their turn. Each suspected the other of wanting to filch his own pie.

Kyrill put his hand to his waist to see whether his dagger was in its proper place.

The housewife entered. She brought with her a smell of warm milk and dung. Placing the bucket of milk on the bench, she rattled at the oven door.

All together they partook of the host's fare, meagre indeed, a stew of peas and dried mushrooms highly seasoned with onion.

"Do you not brew mead?" Kyrill asked.

"I neither brew myself nor allow any other to brew. You are welcome to stay as you will. But you must be satisfied with singing, eating soup, and give over talking about mead."

"A meal without mead is like a song without words."

"As you will. Each to his own taste," answered the old man severely.

"What's that you say? Do you take us for men of mean wits?" asked the man with the pointed beard threateningly.

"Hold your tongue, Schap," remonstrated Kyrill's neighbour softly.

"A fig for them all! They're just a nosy lot—candle-snuffers."

"Schap!" came from the same man in rebuke. His voice was even more subdued and insistent.

The man with the pointed beard withdrew into the obscurity of his corner again. Outside it was dark. The door had not been closed and the damp, cool air drifted into the room. It was still raining, and drops pattered on the wooden floor of the porch.

Cyril realized that the seven travellers gathered together here did not belong to one gang, but that there were two or three separate groups.

"His beard is not the only thing that is sharp about Schap," mused Kyrill. "I shall have to keep an eye open tonight. It's not like being in the shelter of the woods, I guess."

"How now, host?" cried Kyrill. "What about getting a shakedown somewhere?"

"All in good time, kind guest."

"I'd prefer a quieter place."

The old man shot a sidelong glance at the peasants. They were listening intently to the conversation.

"Never fear. You'll get a good night's sleep."

"Who knows," thought Kyrill, "perhaps our host has a gang of his own. Lying down is easy, but what about getting up again? A man can't trust kindness nowadays. RapsCALLIONS have taken to prowling, garbed as monks. Well, a cassock gives better protection than armour!"

"Come to think of it," Kyrill suddenly realized, "I'm one of that ilk myself."

The host led him to a shed. It stood just outside the yard. At the bottom of the heavy door a corner had been cut away for the cat to get through. A stuffy smell of corn and mice pervaded the atmosphere. On top of the corn-bin, to the left of the door, a bearskin lay outspread, and the host dragged a sheepskin coat over it.

"The nights are getting cold," he explained. "There's a bolt on the inside. Don't worry, kind guest."

"Christ save you. Look to my horse."

"That I will, to be sure."

In the darkness Kyrill climbed on to the couch. He did not lie down, but rested his head on his elbow and listened. "I don't trust the host," he thought. "To him a wall is a door." Again he felt for his dagger and knife.

"Ugh! If I could only take to the woods and have a good night's sleep . . ."

The host returned to the cottage to find that two of the men, Schap and another, had disappeared. But some small coin lay on the table in payment for the shelter and food they had received.

"Where the devil can they have gone?" mumbled the old man in surprise.

"Good riddance, says I," remarked the swarthy fellow contentedly.

"Well, it's their own business," agreed the host, going towards the stove. "I've given the merchant a shakedown in the shed at the back. He'll have a good sleep in the hay."

The swarthy man winked slyly.

"You know best," said he.

The old man looked his relief, and asked :

"What about you ? Will you sleep on top of the stove ?"

"No. We've got to be off soon."

"As you like."

And he climbed on to the flat stove.

At the first glimmer of dawn, which came late owing to the overcast sky, Kyrill heard stealthy footsteps. Several men crept towards the shed.

Kyrill slid off the corn-bin, drew back the bolt as gently as possible so as not to make it squeak, and went out.

Like a thief, he stole round the moist log walls, hugging them closely, so that the wet nettles scarcely made a sound, and thus reached the gates of the yard. He tried the latch, only to find that the gates were locked. Then he started to wriggle underneath. But here again he was foiled, for the yard had evidently not been cleared of manure for a long time and the opening was too small for a man to squirm through.

"It's impossible that there should be no sort of loophole into the yard," thought Kyrill.

And sure enough one of the planks was loose. It could be moved. Kyrill crept into the yard. There stood his horse drowsily snuffing hay.

Kyrill stroked him and peered into the trough. The animal had been given oats and plenty of hay. Stepping aside, Kyrill lay down on the hay. When he had snuggled himself in, he heard the host come out of the cottage and shout :

"Whoa there ! Keep quiet."

"He sleeps lightly," thought Kyrill.

But he had nestled into the hay to some purpose. No sooner had the host withdrawn than a hand touched the gates from without. . . .

The loose plank was pushed noiselessly aside. Someone stood still, trying to accustom his eyes to the darkness. This must mean that it was getting light outside. Above him, under the roof, pigeons began to stir. Squinting up in that direction, Kyrill caught a gleam of light, sharp as a knife-blade, coming through a chink. Dawn !

A man slipped across the yard and began to stroke the horse's neck soothingly. Then he seized the chain and began to unhitch it with his right hand while continuing to caress the animal with his left. He seemed to fear lest the beast bite him.

Kyrill suddenly sprang to his feet. The man stood stock still. It was Schap.

"How now ! What might you be up to ?"

"And you ? Anything the matter ? No harm meant. . . ."

Kyrill came nearer. The horse blocked the way to the gate. Schap had no time to pass round the animal, so he darted under its belly and made with all speed for the exit. Kyrill did not bother to pursue the would-be horse-thief.

"Funny business," he thought, taken by surprise. "Just like me escaping death under a horse's belly." He chuckled. "Well, I've tried two trades in a single day. Being a soldier is inconvenient, for anyone might take me to be a deserter from the army. A merchant—too much worry and people won't let

a body sleep. Either way a man can't put on flesh. Maybe 'twould be better to slip into a cassock again. The most peaceful trade of our times."

And suddenly he remembered with pleasure that not far away under the moss he had a goodly treasure hidden. No need to hurry. There was plenty of time to look around.

He hitched up the chain again, slipped through the loophole made by the dislodged plank, walked along the street, which was by this time light, and re-entered the shed.

Chapter X

COUNCILS AND PREPARATIONS

THE LONG, QUIET AUTUMN NIGHT DREW TO AN END. A DAWN FULL OF MOISTURE was breaking over the forest. Sergei awoke, sat up and leaned against the wall. Voices came softly to him from the neighbouring cell. It seemed as though one of them was that of a woman.

"It's time to be going. Day is at hand."

Sergei carefully lowered his feet on to the soft white mat. Passing into the corridor, he stopped by the door behind which the monk Alexander was housed. He recognized Alexander's muffled voice, but it was not easy to catch every word he said. The woman's voice reached him clearly. She said, with a slight yawn:

"Time to go?"

"It is still early."

"I might meet someone. That would be awkward. Why don't you have another nap?"

"It is time for me also."

"As I lay awake watching you, I thought: 'I've been a long time with you, and still I cannot understand.'"

"So you have the same qualms even now?"

"Well, just picture things for yourself. You are so firm when leading others to God, and yet here you are . . . with me."

Sergei was surprised. Alexander had served him for many years, and it had never occurred to him to doubt the man's chastity. From behind the wall Alexander's voice came, saying:

"We need faith. Faith has united us all. Faith moves mountains. Were it necessary for the cause of faith to give you up—I should leave you."

"Would you really?"

"Today, Russia is strong in her faith. Faith encircles her like a ring."

"Yet you dally with me. You are a monk. Are you not afraid of sin?"

Alexander stood near the door and the woman approached him. Sergei did not move. He remained listening.

"You are not afraid?"

"I'm afraid that you'll be seen leaving. That will be a sin because it constitutes temptation to others."

"But you yourself—have you no fear of sin?"

"There is an animal called a lion. Have you ever heard of him?"

"The one that lived in the wilderness and tore the martyrs to pieces?"

"Ay, that's the fellow. Passion is that same lion. God has endowed all

men with it—monks not excepted. We are but human. I have been given it in abundance. Some can live with that lion in the same cell and tame him by fasting and prayers. Night after night they thrash and subdue him. For a time the beast is exhausted and cowed. But when he scents the moment of weakness in his master he hurls himself on him ferociously and there is no escape. The cell is small and the exit narrow. I do not starve my lion. I feed him and he is as affectionate as a cat. He'll never devour me. I am at peace in my cell and can devote my energies to works of faith without fear."

"You speak in parables."

"With much of truth in them. Well, go now. The day has dawned."

Before Alexander's door opened, Sergei hurried from the passage into the yard. The early light, like a sprinkle of dewdrops, lay across the bushes. Beyond the trees a bell rang in the Simonev monastery. From the distance the sound of the Kremlin bells could be heard.

The army had left Moscow. Dmitri was to follow tomorrow.

Sergei, stooping slightly, walked forward leaning on his staff. His steps were firm and deliberate.

He was not going to the Simonov monastery where he usually stayed when on a visit to Moscow, but straight to the Kremlin.

"Alexander! Alexander! I never realized how near and persistent temptation could be."

Sergei had entrusted his very life to Alexander, had taken him on so many journeys and wanderings. . . . The prior walked on, looking calmly into the faces of the people he met. Few of them could bear his direct, inflexible gaze. Those who recognized him stopped and bowed. Others dropped to their knees.

He went on his way, wrapped in thought. Was the ring of faith which encircled the Moscow principalities strong? Or was there a flaw in it? The day of battle was drawing nigh. His courage was beginning to waver. Was everything ready? Dmitri still pressed him to accept the office of Metropolitan. Thus he would become head of the All-Russian Orthodox Church. No! No! In his poor clothing, covered with road-dust, with the renown his asceticism and wisdom had earned for him, he wielded more power than any prince in the land, even more than the Metropolitan himself. Dmitri failed to understand that this kind of power helped to forge the ring and make it stronger.

The Prince's palace, bathed in the golden rays of the morning sun and elaborately decorated by the brushes of skilful painters, stood on the summit of a green hill. Each soldier guarding it crossed his arms on his breast, and Sergei blessed them as he stepped over the threshold.

Several of Dmitri's more intimate boyars were sitting with the Grand Prince when Sergei entered. They stood up to greet him. Dmitri likewise rose and approached Sergei to crave his blessing.

The prior sat apart listening to Tiuchev, who had taken the floor. He contemplated with approval the austere, well-fitting, neat clothes the boyar wore. They were made of black cloth of Frankish manufacture, and the borders were modestly embroidered with a red and white design. The man's raiment never shifted while he spoke. It seemed as if his body led a separate existence from his face.

"There are two wise and learned men who have come from the west—Goreslav Bronevski the Pole and Ruvald the Swede. These might prove worthy teachers."

"Is there no one else?" inquired Dmitri.

Sergei turned to Bobrok, asking:

"What are they discussing?"

"They are choosing a tutor for Vasili Dmitrievich. It is time he started lessons."

"Have they no inkling," thought Sergei, "that the Tatars may at any moment thrust their way hither?"

"There are also Greek teachers as in ancient days," continued Tiuchev. "Paisi of Mount Athos is very learned. He is now at Goritski monastery going through his noviciate with Lev the Nestorian. Then there is another Greek called Vasili, sent here by the Patriarch. He translated the Alexander Romance and is at present writing the life of Metropolitan Alexei."

"He'll bring up my son in fear of the Patriarch, teach the lad Greek, but will he be able to make the youngster think in Russian?"

Bobrok suddenly guessed Dmitri's intentions, and glanced at Sergei, who understood and smiled back.

"Ruvald is waiting in the passage. He has arranged about the supply of arms for us from Sweden."

"Summon the Swede. I would have a word with him."

A grizzled man, short and thick-set, with grey eyes beneath stern brows, proudly entered the chamber at the Prince's bidding.

Dmitri, who was sitting sideways on a bench in a homely, unofficial attitude, ignored the stranger's bow. He merely smiled and asked:

"What sort of a journey did you have? Did anyone offend you?"

"Thank you, sire, all went well. One of our boats carrying armaments capsized in the Moskva near Ruza, but we managed to save the cargo. Our steel does not fear water."

"Is it good steel?"

"Excellent."

"We should not accept it were it otherwise. Last year you had to take three boatloads back. It might have been the same thing this time."

"You upset us greatly then. But I managed to dispose of the cargo in Novgorod. The Livonian Knights bought it."

"Everyone to his taste!"

Dmitri's reminder had evidently vexed the Swede, though the smile did not leave his clean-shaven face.

"We forge excellent arms. You know nothing of our craft."

"We shall learn."

"But as yet you can't. What can anybody make here?"

"Oh ho!"

Dmitri was immediately on the alert.

"What crafts do you Russians know? The people are ignorant, and yet they dare to abuse our artisans."

Dmitri rose to his feet, his face flushing crimson. The boyars sidged in their seats.

"Abuse! Well, their abuse has been to some purpose, since this time you have brought good swords and coats of mail. It's made you realize that you have got to forge properly. As to our ignorance—you'd do well to bow to the ground and thank us for that. If our land did not stand as a buffer facing the sunrise, there'd be nothing left of you or your handicrafts and trade. You forge good swords because we never sheathe them."

The Swede's face went pale.

Dmitri sat down calmly and said :

"You have been recommended as tutor to my son."

"I am ready to do my uttermost."

"Your services will not be required. My grandfather, Kalita, did not have any book-learning taught to my father, Prince Ivan. Neither did my father have me taught any Greek learning. And I am not going to have my boys taught Greek philosophy. Nor shall they read Ugorian or Bulgar books or learn to chatter in Polish. I want them to know Russian lore. I want them to draw closer to the Russian people, so that they won't look this way and that while missing what's under their noses. There is Oleg of Ryazan. He is learned enough and knows many languages, yet he does not understand his own native Russian. The times are such that we Russians must stand shoulder to shoulder. When these evil days are past, our grandchildren will learn and study. Their native common sense will remain unchanged. Nobody can take that from them. For the moment all we have to know is the science of war. Battle sharpens our wits."

The Swede retorted :

"None the less, the princes and kings of the west have a good knowledge of Ugorian, Swedish, and German books, and . . ."

"The reason why they are able to study is that we have swords in our hands instead of books, and because our spears are turned eastward . . . You can go, Swede. We shall pay you for your arms. If you can collect another caravan this year—bring it along and we shall buy it. If the arms are of poor quality, you'll have to take them back. Go !"

The Swede took his departure. Then said Tiuchev :

"Excuse me, sire, I have engaged the Pole, Goreslav, to teach my children. I shall dismiss him today."

"Think the matter over before you act. A prince needs a warrior's brain. Russia has never despised book-learning."

"Let booklore be taught in the monasteries. We need it not. I shall order the Pole to go. I am ashamed of myself, but I feared the criticism of others. I dreaded lest they say that the Tiuchevs are ignorant. My grandchildren will study when the time comes, but my sons are in need of other things."

"You are, unless I am mistaken, of the Ugorian boyars?"

"My grandfather was. I am Moscow bred."

"Well, get rid of the Pole if you want to. But have your children taught. Surely we do not wish to sink to the level of villeins? Never dare to forget that you are a boyar."

Dmitri went up to Sergei and said :

"Father, the Prince of Tver seems to be up to some of his tricks again. Neither by fire nor sword nor word can I put a stop to his grumblings."

"I shall find out. I'll send for his father-confessor. He is one of us from Troitsa. I can also tell Bishop Feodor not to countenance dissent."

"Much the same in Ryazan. The boyars think too highly of their Oleg. They should think a little more about God."

"Bishop Vasili has the more influential of those Ryazan people under his eye. Many of them have become tamer now. I have chosen and blessed another brother for Vasili of Ryazan. He probably left for his new post this morning. I gave him a letter to take with him."

"I bow down in reverence for your prayers, Father Sergei. I shall tell Deacon Nester to prepare a deed for you. Take it when you go. I am granting your Troitsa monastery fresh hunting rights. You will be permitted to catch

beaver and other game on the River Voria. This is as an advance reward for your prayers during my absence on the battlefield."

"You will never be forgotten in our prayers, Dmitri Ivanovich."

When Bobrok came up to them, Dmitri asked him:

"Well, Dmitri Mihailovich, have you any information about the Tatars? You promised to let us know."

"I have no very recent information. I made inquiries from persons who know their manner of fighting and their strongest weapons; I have drawn my own conclusions."

Sergei watched the two men. He was aware of Dmitri's dislike for book-worms. The Prince was a warrior, straightforward in battle and wholly devoid of cunning. He also knew that Dmitri did not give much thought to God. He looked after his principedom and grudged time for prayers and books, despising the studious. Bobrok, on the contrary, spent the greater part of his nights poring over books or gazing at the stars and singing. That accounted for Dmitri's dislike of Bobrok. Yet none could compete with Bobrok where warfare was concerned, so the Prince could not dispense with his services. Bobrok behaved as if he did not know that at times an evil serpent entered Dmitri's heart—a serpent whose name was envy.

This same serpent gnawed at Dmitri's heart today. A terrible battle was pending, the troops were already on their way, tomorrow the Grand Prince would be off, but Bobrok would remain behind to guard Moscow.

Sergei knew that Dmitri wished for all the glory of the enterprise to accrue to himself. Every little bit of it. Not an iota was to go to Bobrok. Sergei watched them. How peacefully they talked together on the eve of their parting! Perhaps they would never see one another again . . .

Long was the conversation between Dmitri and Bobrok. The latter traced something on the bench with his finger while Dmitri's eyes were as though glued to the design. And though not a single line of drawing was visible on the crimson cloth which covered the seat, yet both men could picture the lines and call to mind an imaginary battleground full of warriors, weapons, and ambushes.

Sergei took his leave in order to visit the little godson, Prince Yuri, and to calm the fears of Evdokia Dmitrievna, who was troubled about her husband. In recent days Dmitri had been absorbed in thought, failing to answer when she spoke to him, and spending much of his time with the boyars. They had their men's affairs and wartime anxieties, but she had a woman's heart, prone to sadness and readily moved to tears. This might be Dmitri's last day of life in Moscow. When he took his leave tomorrow he might never see her nor talk to her again. Perhaps these days were the last for herself, her children, Moscow, and the whole of Russia.

Sergei entered and looked so calmly into her tear-dimmed eyes, fondled Yuri so tenderly, that peace seemed to have come into the room with him. Dmitri's desire was that peace and quiet should reign in Moscow and throughout the whole of Russia during these days. Evdokia suddenly realized this.

"Father Sergei, I intend going to the evening service to be among our people. We women are shedding many tears just now. My husband, too, is setting forth to battle. We shall all pray together."

"Yes, Princess, go. Give alms. Tell them not to grieve. The days of the Tatars are passed. Time has left them stranded. We have wept long enough on account of them. Our own time is at hand."

Chapter XI

THE HORDE

DUST ROSE ON THE ENDLESS STEPPE, MILE UPON MILE. THE WAGGON-WHEELS squeaked. Drove of horses grazed as they moved along. The Tatar mounts flung up their heads and neighed towards the Russian breeze. As the distance grew away from the inhabitants of the Horde and nearer to Moscow the grass became denser, the winds gentler, and the skies hung lower and more impenetrable.

The track was bordered by immemorial tumuli which, in the evening gloom, resembled the tents of native nomads.

Along the banks of nameless rivers lay the ruins of walls grown to be one with the surrounding earth. Ancient ramparts and ditches were overgrown with wormwood. Wild raspberry canes sprang from the mouths of pits, scalloped out by whom it was impossible to say in the unpeopled wilderness. The folk had left owing to all too frequent visits from the Tatars. For many a mile the deserted land lay like a broad riband between the Horde and Russia. And the Tatars were marching on Russia again. Where formerly tender Slav songs had filled the air, where maidens had lilted as they wove their garlands of flowers, hawks now winged their way, uttering their strange, disquieting cry, and owls hooted plaintively into the night. Here, once upon a time, the plough had striven to wrench a harvest from the soil, the warrior had cried aloud to encourage his steed. Now the burrowing mole was the sole digger in the earth which yearned to yield its fruits. Roofs and hearths had then pressed close on one another, trade and labour had united people, but now weeds covered the trampled, desolate lands and goldfinches had taken up their abode in them. The Tatars were marching on Russia again.

The dawns were becoming chillier and damper, and at night the men-at-arms had to swathe themselves in woollen cloaks.

Scattered over the unbounded steppe the herds wandered, eating all the pasturage, not trampling it down as they made their way towards Moscow. Sheep and goats bleated, drove of horses neighed, herds of cattle lowed as they surrounded the invincible cavalry of the Golden Horde. Like peaceful shepherds, the warriors followed in the wake of the beasts. In a slowly moving train of creaking waggons, weapons and other accoutrements trundled behind. The advance units were far ahead and messengers from them, arriving from time to time, brought no news of the Russians. The Tatar Horde had pillaged and plundered their foes at Nizhni-Novgorod and were dragging along the booty which they hoped to sell at the earliest opportunity—utensils and clothing which were of no use to the Horde, not to mention swords smeared with blood and earth. Resistance at Nizhni-Novgorod had been feeble, but the inhabitants had managed to get away betimes. Few had been captured. The soldiers were eagerly looking forward to the spoil which awaited them in Moscow.

Yet more marshes and forests lay ahead. There would be other rivers with towns along the banks and beyond these further expanses of forest. There would be many battles and fires and much weeping. Only at the end of this road would Tatar eyes at last behold Moscow.

But in that city the merchants had gold stored away in coffers, the boyars were possessed of untold wealth, the maidens had white bodies and fair hair.

Dmitri, the proud Prince of Moscow, would present each one with a gift of gold and go down on his knees to every Tatar.

Yonder, behind the thick wall of forest, lay Moscow, the town whose roofs were of gold, the saddles cased in silver, and the stirrups gilded.

The khan's wives looked greedily forward, chafing at the slow pace of nomad camp life and their advance. To them the enemy's army seemed like the lid of a pot full of allurements and liquor. Each wished to see this lid as quickly as possible and lift it off the pot. The women lived in tilt-carts, did the milking, combed the burrs and thorns out of the camels' hair, carried water, stitched the clothing, and at the hour of battle they leaped on horseback to follow the fighting men and create the impression that the Tatar army came in uncountable numbers.

The relief system was strictly observed as Ghenghis-khan had decreed of old. While the first batch of warriors was fighting, the second was at rest. Hours of battling were rightly kept so that to the enemy the Horde seemed to be invincible, inexhaustible, innumerable. In such wise had Ghenghis ordained that things should be.

He himself had invariably gone on his shift when his turn was due, he himself had helped the women to bestride the horses and had taught the khans' wives to keep their places on the flanks so that the enemy might believe they were a reserve division. It was his wont to go ahead, leading the herds and the train of baggage and tilt-carts. There was grazing for the cattle everywhere, and these same cattle fed the warriors even in places laid waste by the fires of battle.

And Begich adhered strictly to the traditions of Ghenghis-khan.

His coat clinging to him neatly, his leather belt girt tightly about his loins, his beaver-edged cap pulled firmly on his head, he sat in the saddle surveying his army as it marched along on all sides of him. Begich's beard was grey and his face tanned with exposure to sun and winds. A white film floated over the iris of his eye like an egg. Smallpox had eaten away the skin of his face, which was beginning to show a delicate fretwork of wrinkles.

Begich was in the habit of spitting over his left shoulder, and the more he thought the more he spat. His soldiers interpreted these signs to their own satisfaction, thus gaining an inkling as to events to come. Before a battle the commander's spitting became prodigious; when the fight was over the wrinkles smoothed out.

Begich knew not defeat.

He had fought in the lowlands of the Don, he had waged war in the Kuban, he had led raids and been on campaigns. Many a time his horse had been killed beneath him. During all his incursions he collected women for his own gratification. He had listened to songs on the shores of the sea and in the deep silences of the far-flung steppe. His horses had laboured through the ice-bound recesses of mountains and along the untrodden sands of the desert. Heat and cold he endured in the same lightly quilted woollen coat. At night he would sleep on hard felt matting with a horse-cloth or saddle beneath his head to serve as pillow. When he taught the girls he had captured the arts of love he made no change in his bedding. On his return from a campaign he sought the seclusion of his garden at Sarai. But in the peaceful magnificence of his home he would prepare impatiently for fresh expeditions, which would mean renewed burnings, increased wealth, sleeping on malodorous felt, drinking of camels' milk, and the voices of his men raised in song as they followed the herds, their weapons clanking at their sides.

It was as if his whole life had been spent in the saddle, sitting there stern

and motionless, while the world flowed past somewhere beneath him, under his horse's hoofs.

He knew the business of war, for the old soldiers still remembered what Ghenghis's men had taught them. More than once he had pondered the words and read the wise instructions left behind by the great ruler of the world.

Begich sat his horse unruffled. A new river, by name Rus, meandered before him. This was not the first time he had seen these waters, for he had sent the princedoms of Ryazan and Nizhni-Novgorod up in flames, had travelled as far as Kiev, and had talked with many a Russian prince when they visited the Horde. "Ah," he thought, "I shall have to travel this same road many times yet."

The droves of horses pursued their course. The baggage waggons creaked. Far in the distance, many miles in advance, rode the scouts of the invincible cavalry.

And there in the grass covering the ancient tumuli, crouching behind the grey fragments of the stone figures of women, lay the soldiers of Dmitri observing the strength of the host as it passed on its way.

The dust spiralled up into the sky. The Horde marched on Moscow, creeping along like a forest fire, while like smoke the dust of the steppe rose to the heavens.

From time to time the nomad dogs, brown and hairy, barked and howled towards the tumuli.

"There must be wolves lurking around," the soldiers explained to Begich.

Begich did not fear the enemy. From of old, from the days of the first campaigns against the west, the Tatars had succeeded in breaking Russian resistance. Now Russia was crushed and downtrodden. When certain Russian princes became arrogant they were beheaded, their towns burned, the inhabitants taken into slavery, and all the wealth divided. Now, once again, one of them had raised his head in pride and had ventured to speak insolently—Dmitri of Moscow. It was a satisfaction to know that his town was a rich goal for plundering activities. There would be much to gain from the campaign, and not in vain would the horses' hoofs be damaged and swords blunted.

Ghenghis-khan had ordained that a tithe of the wealth from the vanquished should be taken as tribute of conquest. But Dmitri had ransomed himself from Mamai, had even obtained a reduction of his tribute to the latter and had become rich.

Ghengis had been wise. His demands were high, not from a spirit of avarice but for the sake of peace. He argued that an enemy burdened with heavy taxation cannot be refractory, is not in a position to put up a fight, becomes deferential. A conquered people withers away while the conqueror grows strong. Such had been Ghenghis's instructions; and Begich detested Mamai for his stupidity. He had yielded to Dmitri's pleading and had allowed him to accumulate wealth. Begich was a typical soldier, whereas Mamai had all his life hankered after the khanate, or, as the Russians declared, "desired to be tsar".

"Tsar indeed!" cried Begich aloud, listening the while to the sound of the foreign word.

Towards evening Begich dismounted, and the women brought him a copper bowl filled with boiled meat and carrots seasoned with pepper.

While he ate, Begich heard the soldiers singing in the distance, and these songs of his fellow-countrymen which accompanied him everywhere made the grey skies of Russia and the damp empty steppe seem almost like home.

He sat on a carpet, and his intimates were gathered around him. They were his comrades-in-arms, his boon companions of many a battle. There were six of them and he made the seventh of the group. A lucky number, and Begich resisted violently when newcomers were pressed upon him, such as relatives of a khan or those who had distinguished themselves in battles unknown to him. These rejects now followed in his army and had formed their own circle. They were wholly detestable to him. Even while campaigning, these men slept soft, ate delicately and well, paid through the nose for beautiful women captives, and prided themselves on talking Persian—though few of them really understood the language.

After Ghenghis's death, much had been changed. The Tatars mixed their blood with that of the conquered peoples who were prisoners of war or slaves. Cheekbones were no longer as high as they were wont to be, neither were the eyes of the present generation as long and slanting. The woollen clothing was not so coarse, nor were hands as sturdy in the fight. Yielding couches were demanded for slumber and gardens were expected to flower around the tents. As if a tent pitched in the fresh open steppe were to be grumbled at!

Frequent changes of khans took place nowadays, for one slew the other, brother stole in upon brother, sons in their impatience helped their fathers to die. Relatives and favourites followed one another in the Mongol army, yet the composition of the circle remained unchanged with its musicians, painted boys, and slave women.

Begich hated the lot of them. They kept well outside the direct line of battle, and though they loathed the barbarians they had no notion of how to crush them. It was he, Begich, who did the work, while they rushed back to Sarai to boast of their victories. He took prisoners, but they contrived to make all the profit out of them. Begich despised them and they despised Begich. Begich was a necessary imposition. He was stern and strong; he scaled walls and set towns ablaze. He even penetrated the conflagration in order to garner treasures which he flung out to them as they fled and hastened away from the scene of conflict in order to hide the booty in a place of safety. Begich knew that their friendship would assist him in the fight, whereas their enmity might cost him his head. Nay, even worse might befall: they might contrive his removal from the command of the army and force him to live for the duration of his life in the gardens of Sarai, lounging on silken rugs from Bokhara, with his campaigns no more than a fading memory.

So Begich went his way and they went theirs. Both needed one another and yet were completely alien to one another.

In the cool evening air Begich sat with his six friends. They all wore the simple dress of soldiers. Nothing was easier for them than to throw off coat or caftan and don their battle array.

From the west, visible from afar on the open steppe, silhouetted against the pink glow in the sky, a horseman came galloping.

The seven awaited his advent tranquilly, sipping kumiss the while. Silently they sat, knowing full well that since the rider came with such speed at the usual hour he would bring the usual news.

He did not dismount. The horse stood still with lowered head. The messenger's carriage was upright in the saddle.

"I report," said he, "that there are no Russians to be seen. There is a forest in the distance."

"Are there any signs of towns, nomad settlements, or of peaceful populations?"

"We heard a cock crow. On the other side, very far away, we saw a good deal of smoke. They may be burning down the forest. We detained some monks who were on their way to Sarai, wishing to see the Russian mullah there and to pray."

"Did you find any property on them?"

"Very little. Weapons and food. Nothing else."

"Bring them here. We must have a look at them before they go to the Horde."

"They went of their own accord."

"Who allowed them to go?"

"Ak-Bugai."

"Tell Ak-Bugai to hand over his command to Tursun and to come here at once. Quick march!"

The horseman gulped down the kumiss which Begich himself handed up to him. Then he swung into the saddle of a fresh horse and retraced his way through the steppe.

The following morning Ak-Bugai presented himself before Begich, who was surrounded by veterans and captains. Begich sat on a hillock bespread with a piece of coloured felt, while Ak-Bugai stood at the base of the tiny elevation. Begich looked down on the man from his perch.

There was a scar like a rosy lizard across the old soldier's bluish cheekbone which Begich gazed at and at the grey-bearded man with his broad shoulders.

"Whither are you marching, Ak-Bugai?"

"On Russia."

"Is the road an old one upon which you are marching? I ask you, is it the road from Moscow to Sarai?"

"No, that road is far away. It is a good one for the herds, but the cavalry and infantry following them are going by another road."

"I see that you yourself have understood your mistake."

"I have."

"Tell me in what your fault lies, so that everybody shall know."

"I took two monks and questioned them. 'Whither are you bound?' 'To Sarai,' they answered, 'to pray with the Russian priest there.' 'And are there no Russian priests in Moscow?' I asked. 'Ah, that there are, and they pray well. But we wish to pray in the church at Sarai.' I remembered the old orders, and they hold good even now. Priests are not to be beaten or taken captive."

"Priests speak to the people and the people hearken to their words. If we protect the priests, we preserve peace among the people. But two monks alone in the empty steppe bearing no gifts to the priest at Sarai—these are no ordinary monks. What have you done with them?"

"I gave them food and ordered that they be brought here in the morning."

"And by tomorrow morning they will have disappeared."

If a Tatar kills another Tatar, he shall be punished with death. But if a murderer finds a suitable answer to the judge's question, the criminal shall not be condemned to the death penalty. This was one of Ghenghis's ordinances. Only a serious offence was punishable by death. But few delinquencies were considered grave and the soldiers seldom committed them.

Begich reflected for a while, and then said to Ak-Bugai:

"Give up your arms to the soldiers."

The old man handed over his weapons as commanded. Begich then sent a soldier to fetch the women. The women approached. "Here," Begich told

them, "this old man will help you to carry water and collect camel's dung for fuel. He may even learn to milk the camels. He is no longer a soldier. Take him away."

Ak-Bugai stepped over to the group of women and then fell back and flung himself on the ground, burying his face in the soil. Not a word did he say, not a cry did he utter. He no longer had a lien on the earth, but lay there silent, shamed and submissive, face downwards while the soldiers and invincible cavalry marched by. When the creak of waggons drew near, he rose and opened his eyes. At last he stepped over to Begich's waggons and walked alongside, mixing with the crowd of slaves.

Begich rode at the head of his troops, sitting firmly in the saddle, eyeing each bush as he passed so that he might memorize it for life. Thickets with their undergrowth, the feathery plumes of the mountain ash, and birch groves making sumptuous tents of their leafage sprang into view. The waggons creaked. Already the cattle had entered the forest and were mooching slowly along, sniffing the unaccustomed herbage, breathing in the unknown smells. Begich did not stir in the saddle, but merely spat over his shoulder as he saw a horseman hastening towards him at this unwonted hour. On reaching Begich the rider wheeled his steed about and rode beside his commander.

"I have to report that an hour since we caught sight of five Russians. They were making their way through the forest on horseback. Soldiers to a man. We pursued them with the utmost diligence, but they fled through the woods like wolves, neither bending their heads nor touching the branches. But the branches of the very first tree we met knocked us from the saddle. The forest helps them."

"Yes, the forest helps them."

"Nothing else to report."

"Who followed the Russians?"

"Tursun and ten horsemen."

"Tell Tursun and his men to leave the advance guard and return to me here. Kavya shall take ten men of his choice to replace them."

Thus the cavalry of the Horde entered the Russian forest. But on the second day they glimpsed the fringe of trees. Night enfolded them as they emerged on to the shrouded steppe which rolled away to the distant horizon.

This was the Russian plain.

Begich issued orders that no fires were to be lit. But Mamai's nephew, Karagaluk, sent word to say:

"I am cold."

Begich, taking off his coat, told the messenger to deliver it to Karagaluk.

Then a second soldier arrived with word from Tash-bek, who, on his mother's side, was a descendant of Ghenghis. The man said:

"The amirs would dearly like to warm themselves beside you."

To which Begich retorted:

"Wherever my cavalry finds itself, that land belongs to the Golden Horde. But the amirs serve Maverannakher, whose cavalry mine have not yet trampled underfoot. Tell them that my tent is open to Tatars, but that I have no room for amirs."

The soldier went on his way, and Begich fell a-thinking. In Turan, in Maverannakher, the foe was becoming strong and dangerous. Taragai's son, Amir Timur, had assumed an insolent tone with the Horde. Then there was Amir Kazgan and other amirs besides. Maybe he would have to try his blade on their skulls. Some Tatars, even, had called themselves amirs. These

Maimuns! Brainless apes! The Horde would remain stalwart so long as it kept its speech pure and was proud of being Tatar.

Begich had worked himself up into a fury and strode off to where this clique was gathered. He passed by the waggons beneath whose shelter the soldiers had stretched themselves for the night, and by a group of men who were singing. The smell of cattle, the lowing and drowsy moans of the herds, the coughing of sheep, and the scrunch of horses as they grazed—all these Begich passed on his way, while his bodyguard pointed out the road.

"Why are their tents pitched so far from mine?" thought Begich.

He knew where they were encamped by the light of the fire, which glowed in the impenetrable darkness of the steppe. At sight of the fire Begich was inclined to turn back, for he thought they would infer that he had come to stamp it out.

But it was not in him to alter his course in the presence of his soldiers. Many heads had been raised and had turned to gaze after him as he went, many songs had ceased abruptly at his approach, and the women as they peered from out their tents had whispered: "Begich has gone by."

No, Begich was not the man to turn aside from his purpose. He continued on his way and found the men he wanted to see gathered round the blaze. A pot had just been unhitched and it was full of a savoury concoction of mutton. As the steam rose from the meat the smell of condiments and spices filled the air. Begich did not refuse to sit on the feather bedding which was thrust towards him. Neither did he refuse a large beaker of kumiss, thick, cool, and salted. He issued an order to the captain:

"Give the men leave to kindle their fires."

Soon the sound of voices reached the bivouac where Begich sat. Flint struck on steel and the tinders made little red stars so that in a short while the foggy sky was all aglow and rosy. This rosy haze from the fires wrapped itself round the whole encampment, and for the first time Begich felt moisture forming on his lips. The air was saturated with damp.

Begich had not drained the cup of kumiss he held in his upraised hand when the noise of tramping feet and voices fell on his ears. The commander was immediately on his guard. He glanced sideways at his companions. But they merely reached for the dish of mutton and urged him not to lag behind the others. They had not heard the tramping and voices in the night. Their slaves piled fresh logs on to the fire, and the flames sprang up to illumine the ancient Chinese bowl and the blood-hued carpet, and the slender beringed fingers smeared with fat from the food.

The tramping drew nearer. A captain broke into the circle round the fire to announce the return of one of the chief divisions.

"I have to report that to the right of the path a Russian village has been found. Five houses. The inhabitants have fled. Five have been captured."

"Oho!" exclaimed Kaverga. "A good start. You are one of my legion. I recall your face. Bind the prisoners' bonds tighter and loosen their tongues. We shall soon learn the news."

Begich spat over his shoulder.

The captain replied:

"Two of them are girls."

"A splendid beginning. A very splendid beginning!" Kaverga made as if to rise. "Go, bring the girls."

From out the darkness a rider emerged. Begich noticed that the horse's flanks, between the ribs, were quivering and that the face of the man in the saddle was lacerated. Light flashed from the billets of wood which had been

flung on to the fire and lit up the rider's arms, to which a whip had been tied. Two fair plaits of hair were entwined in his fingers. This was how he had brought the captured maids. Their bodices were torn and soiled and their white flesh gleamed through the rents.

They stood head to head, their graceful arms bound behind their backs so that the swell of their young breasts was emphasized and their shoulders seemed to be more sloping than they actually were.

"How much do you want for them?" asked Tash-bek.

Begich looked up into the soldier's face, which flushed deeply and then grew pale.

"I took them by day," he simpered. "Now it is night. I have not touched them. You will have to pay handsomely."

Yes, he had captured them by day in a burning village during the general confusion of the raid, when doors were bursting open and flames were licking the wooden houses and cries arose as the raiders galloped in pursuit. He had found them hiding among some raspberry canes. They had not had time to make good their escape into the forest. They were struck numb with horror when, still inflamed with the chase, he cantered towards them on his maddened horse. He had seized them by the hair, wound their plaits round his arms, and dragged them to the road. They were helpless. But what agony he had been through, poor fellow. He had no wives, and it was with repugnance that he yielded to his lusts when in winter quarters his comrades and he lay huddled so closely together. Had there been only one girl to fall into his hands, he would have known what to do. But while he was busy with one, the other might have got away. Should he have risked the loss of one for the sake of the seductive sweetness of the other? Two girls were a great prize and were worth a good price, whereas one alone was of no great value. So he had dragged them along together as his division rode back to camp. This raid promised to make him richer than any of his brothers-in-arms. But as he led them he was troubled in spirit and his body became a furnace and dilated with desire. He was hard put to it to decide, for passion and avarice struggled within him. As evening drew on he found it peculiarly difficult, until at last he grew so utterly weary that his nerves calmed down. The road stretched endlessly onwards until they reached the main army. Now he would receive a good price and the women would be taken away from him. Suddenly, at Tash-bek's question, a surge of intense jealousy flooded his whole being. But he repressed any sign of it so that he might get his price.

Begich rose to his feet.

"Who sent you to burn the village?" he inquired.

"I myself head a company," answered the soldier.

"Then take the price I offer so that you may not forget that my name is Begich."

And lips, teeth, and nose were mingled in one monstrous pain as Begich's whip slashed across the soldier's face and blood gushed forth in foam from his mouth. Nor had the soldier time to clutch his horse before he was dragged off and taken away.

The girls, struck dumb by all they had witnessed, stood with troubled and starkly gazing eyes. Begich commanded that they should be removed. They no longer belonged to anyone. But the captain did not know to whose tents they should be taken. So he decided to plant them on the women, with the admonition to guard them as the apple of the eye, for "they belong to Begich".

Khazi-Bey exchanged glances with his friends.

"Valour should be rewarded," he said, "and not with a beating."

"I issued orders that no fires be lit. Yet they were lit all the same. I ordered silence on the march. But they set fire to a village and allowed the inhabitants to escape and thus carry the news of our whereabouts. We are at the end of the empty desert. Homesteads are now before us. We have reached places where we must move forward silently."

"One lump of clay will drive off a thousand crows," said Khazi-Bey. He looked round at his friends to see whether they approved his words. Were it not for Begich's low mentality he would not have demeaned himself to speak in parables. These were easier to understand than serious conversation. But Begich understood the meaning of their looks, and, spitting over his shoulder in a rage, he cried:

"If a crow falls foul of a lion, but knows where are his claws, it pecks out the lion's eyes. But if a lion makes for a crow and mistakes it for a puppy, he does not let it escape. Have you understood? I ask you, have you understood? Here are my orders. Get together without delay, rouse the men. As soon as dawn comes we will march forward to contact the advance elements, leaving the waggons behind. We have no time to wait for them. We have arrived!"

He jumped to his feet, and in so doing he stepped by accident on to the dish. The mutton was scattered over the carpet and Khazi-Bey's coat was splashed with grease. Begich took his departure.

Khazi-Bey said angrily:

"Barbarian! Wild ass!"

"We'll talk about all this when we get back to the Horde. I'm fed up with this wooden saddle. It seems to become harder day by day," put in Karagaluk.

The camp had by this time been roused, and Begich strode on through the bustle. None could grasp the significance of this sudden disturbance, for neither cries nor blows had been heard.

Begich usually gave both men and horses a good rest. Tonight they had rested but poorly. Begich himself was dissatisfied, for he preferred to lead men who had received their fill of food and sleep.

They awaited the dawn to retrieve their weapons from the carts. But as the sky waxed lighter a fog descended, blotting out everything, so that even objects close at hand were invisible.

A slender-legged piebald horse was brought to Begich and the slave hastily rubbed the animal's chest with the skirt of his coat.

Begich would have liked to say, "My horse should have been curried beforehand," but instead he held his tongue. He felt no inclination for further speech.

Dawn came at last.

Chapter XII

THE MONASTERY

WITHIN THE CELL THE AIR WAS THICK AND GOLDEN LIKE HONEY. THE WALLS oozed resin. A glimmer of light struggled through the narrow window. A candle burned before the image of Our Lady of Compassion.

While Dmitri was campaigning, Sergei did not withdraw to Troitsa. He lived in a small cell in the Simonov monastery.

In the morning he was brought a psalter which had been specially copied for Troitsa. Sergei carefully examined the loose pages of the manuscript. It was written across the whole sheet, on paper, not on parchment as heretofore. Sergei held this wonderfully soft yet strong fabric in his hands for the first time. He peered at the unfamiliar writing. The psalter was written in a somewhat irregular but easy and cursive style, and it seemed as though the meaning of the book, too, must be readily conveyed.

The initial letters, however, were carefully drawn with a floral design and illuminated in vermilion.

Sergei himself carried the sheets to the copyist.

Sitting against a wall, a young monk, his elbow resting on his raised knee and with the sheet spread over his left hand, was writing, not on a table but on his own palm.

Laying aside the manuscript, he rose to his feet. Sergei bade him continue his work. The young man sat in his place again and resumed his work. He wrote clearly, separating letter from letter, and he left a wide margin all round the sheet. Slowly and with difficulty, a book was coming into existence.

Sergei went to look at what the other scribes were doing. Some were writing on parchment, others on skins. These books were not being written on the whole sheet, but on sheets folded in four or even in eight.

They were copying the Acts of the Apostles, the Triodion, the Alexander Romance or one of the Chronicles. The legends of ancient Greece, the Hebrew song and the Byzantine Canon were being peacefully woven into firm letters by zealous pens.

Every completed book cost dear. They took long to write: two or three pages a day. The scribes purified themselves by fasting, doing penance, and going to confession before they started to write the books.

Sergei bent over the shoulder of a scribe who was copying the Alexander Romance and read:

He cast a spell so that the woman should not give birth. And again, looking at the stars and the cosmic elements, and seeing the whole world placed in the midst of the firmament, and having seen a light like unto the sun in the midst of heaven, he said to Olympias: "Now raise your voice in the cry of travail."

"What can he know of the agony of a woman in labour, of the hour when a child is due to be born? Yet he writes about such things," mused Sergei, as he watched the scribe. He was lost in thought. "And what do I know? Naught but that at this very hour soldiers are fighting and dying while their wives lie in torment giving birth to children. That is how the world keeps a-going. And we who have renounced the flesh have to bless the fallen, baptize the newly born, and write about the birth of men for the edification of those who have attained maturity."

He reluctantly tore himself away from the contemplation of the meticulous and diligent work and withdrew to his cell. Hardly had he reached it when he was told that Metropolitan Mitiai had called to see him.

"He has not taken the trouble to come on foot," thought Sergei censoriously. "He has driven here in a carriage." But he meekly answered the summons of the head of the Russian Church.

Mitiai was a scholar, handsome, and he enjoyed life. It had been only after insistent exhortation from Dmitri that he decided to take the vows.

"You will become a prince of princes," Dmitri had cajoled. "Moscow is

becoming a rallying centre for all Russia. God is giving us His aid. Our Metropolitan must become an instrument for God's purposes. This is what you are trying to evade."

"My Prince, my lord, I am loth to leave the world with all its sorrows and all its joys," Mitiai had to acknowledge.

Still Dmitri insisted :

"Listen, Mihail. Should we get a Metropolitan who is indifferent, he will be zealous on his own behalf but will forget Russia. Now you yourself are from Kolomna. You are one of us. You love Russia and are learned and wise. Renounce the world and I shall give you power."

Mitiai yielded and renounced the world. In the morning after Mass he took the habit, and by the same evening he was installed in the Spaski monastery as archimandrite. Such advancement was unheard of. A monk should rise above his fellows by fasting, by leading a godly life, and by humility. Yet by the will of a secular prince, a man who half belonged to the world had risen above the righteous.

A murmur of disapproval arose among the monks. But Dmitri was not intimidated. He crushed the murmur. He summoned Mitiai to be his chief secretary, to be the keeper of his keys and his princely seals. In fact, Mitiai was to be in charge of all his correspondence. But Metropolitan Alexei had refused to appoint Mitiai as his successor, saying :

"He knows not enough about monastic life. He has given too little thought to God."

"God—is Russia," Dmitri had retorted obstinately. "Were Russia to disintegrate, God would become weaker. If Russia becomes strong, God will become greater."

Alexei said reproachfully :

"You do not know the meaning of your words."

When Alexei lay dying, he did not bless Mitiai.

Mitiai suspected Sergei of intrigue, for the latter was Alexei's chief counsellor.

And by the power of Dmitri, Mitiai was arbitrarily installed as Metropolitan by the All-Russian Council without the sanction of the Oecumenical Patriarch at Constantinople. The Patriarch had chosen Cyprian, and Mitiai had discovered that Cyprian was at Liubutsk on his way to Moscow.

Sergei approached Mitiai to receive his blessing. The Metropolitan seemed embarrassed, and his hand trembled as he made the sign of the cross over the prior. Did not Sergei, the saint, acknowledge Mitiai as supreme head of the Russian Church since he bowed first to receive the episcopal blessing? Yet Mitiai had come to win Sergei's confidence.

Mitiai thawed, but grew uneasy under Sergei's penetrating gaze.

"I admit, holy father, that I feel oppressed. I have exchanged the vale of tears which is the world without for a celestial vocation. Not on account of my covetousness"—and he looked Sergei straight in the eyes—"and yet on account of my covetousness, because I am a sinner. I languish, I hesitate, I seek for peace. Bless me."

Sergei, who had been startled by Mitiai's physical beauty, his eloquence, and his learning, suddenly realized that here was a poor lost son, tortured by sleeplessness, whose sins were already forgiven, since God had seen fit to grant him power to remit sins or to punish them throughout Russia.

"God will bless you, father Bishop. It is not for me to sit in judgment over your sorrows, for I myself am a sinner."

Mitiai had pined for a gentle, affectionate word from Sergei. His grief was

assuaged, since Sergei's weak hand was raised above him to make the sign of the cross.

Sergei quietly accompanied him to the gates. Everyone witnessed this encounter, and the rumour of the meeting travelled across Russia, mingled with the news of the Tatar onslaught.

After evensong Brenko entered the cell.

To him the cell seemed cramped and uncomfortable. But when the bulky and loquacious visitor passed through the door Sergei felt that the space within these tranquil walls expanded.

Brenko drew from his sleeve a piece of parchment twisted into a scroll.

"A missive for you, Father Sergei, from the Metropolitan in Liubutsk."

Sergei glared at him sternly.

"There is but one Metropolitan for all Russia, and his name is Mitiai."

Brenko shrugged his shoulders.

"I am not responsible for this, but the Patriarch at Constantinople."

From the way Sergei's beard trembled and moved sideways, Brenko gathered that the holy man had smiled. Brenko prided himself on his astuteness, and he gave it full rein on every possible occasion. Dmitri understood and valued this quality.

Sergei stretched forth his hand to take the letter. Brenko explained :

"The messenger took the missive to Troitsa."

At this Sergei smiled undisguisedly, for he knew that the courier had gone straight to Brenko and not to Troitsa. Then a memory flashed across his mind.

"Have you any news of the messenger whom the Prince sent to me?" he inquired.

"He is not here."

"In that case, listen to a parable."

"Read the letter first, father."

"What is it about?"

Sergei cast a seemingly casual glance at the boyar and then looked him straight in the eyes.

"Read it aloud to me, Mihail Andreich," said he. "You will make it out quicker than I."

The blood flooded Brenko's face.

"A seer," he thought to himself.

He remained silent, for he assumed that he alone had been granted the gift of divining the secret thoughts and actions of men. Mihail Andreich was non-plussed to find that somebody could divine his own thoughts and secret activities.

This realization was highly displeasing, so he made as if the writing were difficult to decipher. But the words burst forth of themselves before he had had time to read to the end. Cyprian wrote to Sergei :

Nothing that has happened to me, I believe, is unknown to you. Never since Russia came to birth have such things been done to one of her bishops.

I, installed by the will of God and the blessing of the Oecumenical Patriarch as Metropolitan over all Russia, was met by your ambassadors.

They forced the gates, overthrew our sentries and put their own men in their stead. They did me great hurt. I even feared that they might put me to death.

They set a torturer over me, Niceforo the accurst, and no evil did he refrain from inflicting upon me : blasphemies, outrages, mockery, robbery, and starvation. They incarcerated me at night naked and hungry.

They sent my servants away on horses fit only for the knacker's yard, with

cords for bridles. They hounded them out of the town stripped to the shirt, leaving them almost naked, and took away even their boots and caps.

"Niceforo burdened his shoulders with a great sin," said Sergei.

"He is not the man to be afraid of sinning," answered Brenko, contrite and sympathetic.

The two men stood awhile in silence.

"Now for your parable," Brenko could not refrain from asking.

"Here it is. Four years ago I was in Pereyaslav. I was christening Dmitri Ivanovich's son Yuri. Many persons had assembled for the ceremony. Dmitri and I decided to go fishing on the lake. That we might pass unobserved, we dressed in modest garb. We went down to the Trubei and got into a boat. A monk stood upon the bank, waiting to be ferried across. Dmitri said: 'Let's strike a bargain.' I asked, 'What will you pay to be taken across?' The monk cried, 'I will give you a silver piece.' 'Too little,' said I. 'I will give two.' 'Still too little,' I repeated. 'I will give three. I am a messenger from Bishop Alexei to the Grand Prince.' 'Well,' I replied, 'since you are a messenger from the bishop, I will take you over for four.' 'Done!' Dmitri was all the while thoroughly enjoying our bargaining. I pushed off, and took the monk aboard, intending to ferry him over. But he seized me by the middle, hurled me on to the bank, and, brandishing the oars, rowed across. From the opposite shore he called to me: 'Look over there in the sand, I have buried five pieces of silver!' So that was the outcome of our bargaining. 'Thank you, good man,' I shouted. 'How shall I pray to God for you?' 'Pray for Kyrill, the servant of God,' he returned. Dmitri witnessed all these happenings and, being ashamed to show me that he was laughing, went and hid himself. It was this same impudent monk Kyrill who brought me the Prince's letter. I recall his face well. But he was dressed like a soldier."

"Holy father, I shall see that a search be made for this Kyrill."

"He is probably far away from here by now."

"Were he at the ends of the earth, I shall find him. Is there no sign by which he may be recognized?"

Sergei described Kyrill's appearance.

"At times he looks brazen-faced, while at others his demeanour is childlike and quiet. Then again he will be moved to anger or merriment as the case may be. He always gives the impression that he is disturbed in his mind about something." The prior reflected for a time, and then added: "There was a ring on his finger. A gold ring of Byzantine workmanship, set with an opal. A very rare sort of ring."

"Was there a griffin on it?"

"Yes, a griffin held the stone in its sharp claws."

"I know of one such ring. Prince Bobruk used to wear it. It came from Volhynia."

When Brenko had taken his leave, a scribe approached Sergei, saying:

"I have come to ask your advice, Father Sergei. Enlighten us, I beg of you. We are at present writing books on paper which is made from rags. Before they became paper these same rags may have covered the sins of the flesh, may have been a sinner's shirt and have had a part in seduction. They have been worked up by the hands of Latins and were brought from unclean lands. Is it seemly that the Word of God should be written on rags?"

"Parchment is made from pigskin. Does not a pig dwell amid filth of every kind? Yet sacred books are created on its hide, books we revere. Cannot a

lofty spirit lie concealed in the foul and abominable body of man? Are not miracle-workers and ascetics to be found clothed in the lousy tatters of the 'fools of Christ'? The flesh is an abomination. Yet the Word which brought it forth has the power to sanctify it. Thus is a great thought born of wretched man. Thus a flame shoots up from a common candle."

They continued to converse about the frailty of the world, and of purity in human thoughts and actions.

Meanwhile, Brenko was questioning Prince Bobrok.

"You were wont to wear a wonderful ring, Dmitri Mihailovich. I have not seen it for some time."

Bobrok was on the alert in an instant.

"I lost it a while back."

"Lost it? Can you remember where? There is a clue to its whereabouts."

Bobrok shrugged his shoulders. But Brenko insisted:

"A clue that leads to blood, Dmitri Mihailovich?"

Bobrok grew pale and knitted his brows.

"I know not of what blood you speak. Whither does the clue lead?"

"To the murder of the Grand Prince's messenger, and perhaps to many other sins."

"I am not a priest to search out sins. What sort of a man was he?"

Brenko described Kyrill from what Sergei had told him.

"I saw that man during the building of the Tainitski Tower. I've forgotten his name. . . ."

"Not Kyrill by any chance?"

"Ay; is he still alive?"

"He is alive."

"I cannot believe such a miracle."

"Yet so it is."

"What of the guards? Did they hide him?"

"I am inquiring about that now. He may not be alone."

"I was sorry for one of those men. See if he, too, escaped."

"Who?"

"Try to find out first how many got away."

"I shall find out today. Many of those guards are still in Moscow."

"What sort of a clue have you got?"

Brenko told him about Kyrill's visit to Sergei.

"He delivered the letter, in spite of the danger. He went straight to the seer after spilling another man's blood. Deep must be the lack of faith in Kyrill. Such a man is terrible."

"Yet he did not destroy the letter; he delivered it. A man of that sort should be with the army today. Kyrill would not hide in the forest."

"Think so?"

"I am sure of it. Between Moscow and Ryazan—that is where he must be."

Brenko sent for Grisha Kapustin.

"I have not troubled you since last spring. Now listen, Grisha. You must take this man alive. You must find out how he escaped from the guards, how he laid hands on the Grand Prince's messenger, what villainies he is perpetrating now."

"I shall find out, Mihail Andreich. My hand is sure."

"Be vigilant. He may have fled to Ryazan or into Lithuania. . . . Men of his kind flee to Smolensk or Bieliou. But this man is daring. Perchance he is lurking somewhere quite near."

"I shall find out."

Before Brenko had time to reach home Grisha's companions had saddled their horses and were hastening along the Kolomna road to the Oka in search of the conspicuous figure of Kyrill.

Thus did Sergei deliver Kyrill into the hands of Grisha Kapustin.

Chapter XIII

KOLOMNA

THE HEART OF A TOWN IS ITS MARKET-PLACE. ALL CLASSES, ALL TRADES, EVERY citizen converge there. Funerals and weddings start from the market-place, since victuals for wedding feasts and funeral wakes come from there. Wars begin there likewise, for it is in the public square that heralds read proclamations and issue the call to arms. Here the wise man and the fool, the glib of tongue and the reticent, respond to news, to rumour, to every event which takes place in the country, to every echo of distant or nearby happenings.

It was with fear and trepidation that the public square at Kolomna greeted the day of August 11, 1378, which was the year 6886 since the Creation.

Mists trailed their dampness along the confluence of the Moskva and the Oka. Sleepless Kolomna huddled together in the fog. Shops and booths were empty. The shopkeepers entered unwillingly in the trail of their customers. Everyone preferred to be part of the crowd, listening and talking. When a thought has been put into words one gets the feeling that all will turn out exactly according to one's idea and cannot be otherwise.

Only the church doors stood wide. Within their dark depths, candles blazed, incense floated upward, and the murmur of prayers was like the humming of a thousand swarms of bees. The clergy intoned the prayers for victory, the mothers and wives of Kolomna prayed for the safety of the children and servants of God.

The lands of the Horde lay far away. The forests were wrapped in mist, and the highway stretched to the very Horde itself. The opposing armies moved towards one another. Were they destined to meet, and where was the place for their mortal combat?

Never had the Tatars been vanquished. Never! But of deaths, charred ruins, and calamities, there had been many. One hundred and fifty years ago Batu-khan had come by the same road. Then came Diudieni, and Kolomna had been left a smoking ruin reduced to nothingness, no longer a town but a smouldering bonfire. The fruits of year-long toil, hard-won happiness, cherished kindred, and, worst of all, beloved Russia, had been ground to pulp beneath the accursed heel of the infidel. Like a captive maiden, Russia still lay under that heavy yoke. The horsemen of the Horde advanced on Kolomna, with Begich at their head. A sinister rumour preceded Begich, for he was known to be strong, full of guile, experienced in warfare, and ruthless. He, a prince, slept on the bare ground with a saddle for pillow. He disdained bribes and was deaf to cajolery. From Begich neither mercy nor pity could be expected. And his eye was covered with a white film—a bad omen! The rumours were not encouraging. But the prayers of the people in the churches brought peace

and consolation. Here in the dim light and with the scent of incense on the air, all so familiar since early childhood, one felt comforted.

The troops had gone past. The people gazed after them. They gazed at the Prince, too.

Dmitri was their own Prince. He was fond of Kolomna, where he had been married in the Church of the Resurrection. He had fortified the town. His favour was upon the Kolomnites, but the folk of Ruza and of Mozhai were not so defended. Arms there were in plenty. The troops were well equipped. The Prince himself wore a helmet and was dressed in the panoply of war as a warrior should be. Not for him the regalia cap, of which he disliked the feel. From boyhood's days he had been a warrior.

The troops had gone past. Transport waggons trailed in the rear. Patrols had been sent forward. Priests, merchants, and retainers passed by, too. Many a citizen of Kolomna followed in their wake: the merchants to satisfy their greed, the local population to gather news.

For long they waited on the banks of the Oka, at the crossing-place. Those on horseback and those on foot crowded the Ryazan road. Horses fetched a high price in Kolomna. Everybody endeavoured to pack his possessions into carts, while those who had no such vehicle loaded up sledges. In such a plight even a sledge can be pulled along somehow. Kolomna looked across the Oka into the mist. Beyond the forests extended the Tatar steppes, and Tatar archers were taking aim. What lay in store for the Russians? What should they prepare for?

"A fine display as the troops passed by, but how will they return?"

"It is not swampy Lithuania nor pot-bellied Ryazan nor wide-mawed Mordva which are marching on Russia, but the invincible cavalry of the Great Horde."

The women, though they sobbed with terror, listened delightedly to the men's talk.

People swarmed on the towers and belfries and sat astride the roof-ridge of the houses. All eyes were turned to the east. But none could see the east, for it was shrouded in mist.

Kyrill walked, hardly noticing the streets. By the din that issued from it he recognized the square. He pushed his way into the seething throng and was soon absorbed in its fears and gossip. As he looked round he caught the quiet eyes of a barber who was standing aloof by the stump of a tree. Kyrill impulsively turned to him and said:

"Hello! Could you trim my beard and give me a hair-cut?"

The barber glanced at him in surprise and repoved him.

"There are other things to think about just now."

"What are you yourself doing here, then?"

"Me? Why, attending to business, of course. Where else could I be, seeing that my shop is here?"

"That being so, there's no need to talk nonsense."

The barber shot a sideways glance at Kyrill's broad shoulders and at the dagger hanging from his belt. He replied hurriedly:

"Sit you down on the stump."

"Right! You're from Novgorod, aren't you?"

"Who, me? How did you guess?"

"By your dialect."

"Have you visited Novgorod, sir?"

"Get on with your job."

Tying a tape tightly round Kyrill's head, he gave the knot to his customer to hold between his teeth. He then sheared the hair along the tape-line. The result was a neat and even cut.

A young woman, idle as were all at that moment, stopped to gape.

"Fancy trying to make yourself handsomer in these dreadful times!"

"You don't seem to know why men have beards."

"Well, what are they for?"

"To tickle a wench under the armpits."

"Ugh! How shameless . . .!"

She did not go away, but lingered to study his face.

"Have you by chance dreamed of me?"

"Can't remember."

"You would not forget if you had."

"Let me be!"

Yet still she continued to look at him with her gentle brown eyes. Kyrill reflected that these eyes, too, would not be spared if there were an invasion. The light had been snuffed out in many such eyes as these.

"Were you my woman, I'd beat you every day," he said.

"What for?"

"To stop you ogling strange men."

On a sudden, the tears gushed down her cheeks, her lips fell apart, and she sat down on the ground pressing her head in her hands.

"Oh! I can't hold back my tears,
Nor wipe the dewdrops falling down.
My lad is sent away for years
To a far land to seek renown.
From his young wife he's torn away,
And from his little children wrenched . . ."

The Novgorodian stopped his work. Kyrill, his beard but partially trimmed, bent over her.

"Come, come, little fool."

"But what am I to do now? Maybe he is no more!"

"He's over there, is he?"

"Yes."

Kyrill said resolutely:

"He'll come back."

"Ah me, how do you know?"

"So I heard."

"What can I do all alone? Is that what you call life?"

Kyrill spoke again:

"Don't cry. He'll return. I know."

She sat pensive awhile. Then exclaimed:

"Well, he'd better!"

Kyrill said:

"I've got no one to weep for me."

"That's bad," the woman answered in rebuke.

"Now then, get up from the ground. You'll be all of a mess if you don't."

"Who's there to care about what I do? There's plenty of time for getting up."

"Very well, then, sit!"

Apparently she did not wish to go. And Kyrill, too, did not want to part

from her. Timoshei with his bear had disappeared, the Novgorodian looked sullen, in the tavern everybody was burdened with his own troubles and had no compassion to spare for a stranger.

Yet on this particular day people wanted to keep together, to confide personal sorrows to one another. Each cut in upon a neighbour's conversation. Every talk became the general property of Kolomna. If a man sat down to have his hair trimmed, all were agog with curiosity—as though he were laying his head on the block for the sake of all.

"Made rather a mess of that beard."

"And it was so curly and bushy," remarked a saddler with a goatee.

"Don't poach on another man's preserves," retorted Kyrill.

The saddler was affronted.

"Have it as you will! The Tatars will chop your head off, beard or no beard."

"What sort of Tatars, goat?"

"What's that you called me?"

Kyrill's nickname had evidently touched the man on the raw. Trimmed and shorn, Kyrill drew himself up to his full height, saying:

"Goat! Maybe you were sent by the Tatars to frighten the people. For words such as you've just spoken——"

The saddler disappeared. Somebody remarked good-naturedly:

"You've properly scared him."

"A Tatar spy! Stop him!" shouted Kyrill. Someone in the crowd took up the cry:

"Stop him!"

When the mob, excited by the chase, had scattered, Kyrill accosted the woman. She was all of a flutter.

"D'you think they'll lay hold of the fellow?"

"What is your name?"

"Domna."

"And me all the time thinking you were a Kolomnian!"

"Are you making fun of me?"

"Wait; don't go away."

"I've no use for you."

"You might mend my pants."

"I don't want to go home."

"Why?"

"The house is empty."

"What about the children?"

"God has taken them from me."

"There'll be others."

"But now the house is empty."

"Still pining for your man?"

"A plague on him!"

"Why?"

"Come along o' me and I'll mend your pants."

She led him to a suburb. Kyrill's heart turned to water. The street was covered with grass and footpaths wound peacefully along the edges. Goslings greedily snapped off the tufted shoots of camomile plants which were starred with white blossoms. Somewhere not far away, in a similar street, close by the well, Aniuta might be hiding in a dilapidated hut. Perhaps his wanderings through the forest and the skilful way in which he had extricated himself from

his difficulties had had no other purpose than that he should walk through this little street, look at that well, and then disappear for ever into the forest darkness.

Domna paused at her wicket.

"No," said Kyrill. "I've no time. Another day . . ."

Now it was she who seemed loth to part from him.

"Why did you lead me on?"

"I'll come another time."

"Come in and have something to eat."

"Another time, Domna."

"Don't keep on saying that. I won't go in alone."

"D'you think I'm your husband?"

"Why should I stay at home all by myself?"

A sweet melancholy overwhelmed him. Even were it only a woman of her sort who called him and led him to a home—well, that amounted to something. All his life he had lived without home or family. He had grown up on the highways, toiling and suffering humiliations. Thus had he reached manhood, all alone, without affection. This sharp-tongued woman had, on an impulse, been kind to him, and perchance no caress had ever warmed his heart more. You can be kind to someone you do not need, but to reproach a man . . . No, she would not have rebuked him had she not needed him.

"Well, then, give me some victuals."

They entered through the low doorway, the ceiling slanting and low.

Kyrill sat down at the table near the door. Domna got busy at the stove.

"Why have you sat down without removing your coat and boots?"

A feeling of comfort and well-being pervaded him immediately.

She took her seat beside him, and side by side they ate broth out of the same bowl.

Kyrill glanced down at the young woman's thin, sunburnt hand which lay on the table, and placed his palm over it.

But Domna drew away.

"Oh no."

"Why not?"

"We're not married."

"What of that? Just give me a trial . . ."

"Give over or I'll turn you out."

"Do you want to be married?"

"Are you thinking he may not come back?"

"Don't know."

"But you said he would return."

"I do not know."

"Oh, have pity on me!"

Clumsily he stroked her head. Then he put his arms round her and hugged her close. But she wrenched herself free.

"I'll turn you out."

Adjusting her gown, she rose to her feet. Then said:

"But why bother? I'll take it off."

He, too, suddenly sprang up.

"Don't."

He bowed to her ceremoniously, saying:

"My thanks to you, Domnushka, for your hospitality."

"I don't want your thanks."

Though she did not take her eyes off him, she none the less did not detain

him. He bent his head as he passed through the doorway, and did not hear any footsteps behind him. Once outside, he turned and saw that she had not moved from the spot.

"What do you want?"

"Nothing. Just one look."

"I say . . ."

"Well?"

"If . . . will you marry me?"

"If what?"

"If he's killed."

"I don't know."

"Well, go now. But don't forget the way to my house."

"Why?"

"In case he's killed."

"All right."

The fog seemed to be lifting. The grey planks were blackened with moisture. Thick clumps of green moss grew on the wooden roofs. Bath-houses crouched on the banks of the Oka. Kyrill guessed from the smoke filtering up through the roof that the bath-house was being heated.

The anteroom was so crowded a man was hard put to it to make his way through. Men both dressed and in the buff were gathered round a youth who had been sent to get what news he could.

". . . And in the market-place," he was saying, "a Tatar was caught. God's truth, I saw it myself."

"Who was it?"

"Sisoi the saddler, that's who it was."

"Son of a bitch, who would have thought it?" said a decrepit old man in astonishment. He was quite naked, and covered himself as best he might with the bath-broom.

Another asked:

"Sisoi. Ugh, a plague of a scoundrel!"

"A Tatar," explained a priest. "They are all against us Christians."

"But they spare the priests," riposted Kyrill. "Seems they are not reckoned as Christians."

"I'll make you eat those words. . . ."

"As for that . . ." said Kyrill, fingering the hilt of his dagger.

"Words—just like any other words. What is a word? God bless you," said the priest.

"That's right. Good for you that you are in such a hurry. More room for me," said Kyrill approvingly.

"But he's forgotten to wash," exclaimed the bath attendant. "He has only just started to undress."

"He has run off to ring the bells."

"What for?"

"To intone a psalm of thanksgiving for the capture of the enemy Sisoi."

"Ah, I see," remarked the attendant.

Kyrill no sooner entered the steam-chamber than his body exhaled an odour of woodland mingled with resin, tar, and incense. After he had scrubbed himself awhile this smell was replaced by the scent of the human body.

He scoured himself with the bath-broom till his skin flushed pink and became fragrant with the sweet aroma of birch twigs. But the steam-chamber reeked of smoke and damp. A sticky moisture trickled down the walls, and

the bench on which Kyrill sat was slippery. He swilled himself with water, the water from the Oka on whose banks Aniuta dwelt.

"Perhaps she, too, is worrying at this moment? Where will she go if the people are forced to flee the town?"

He returned to the anteroom, where the floor was strewn with fresh straw. He took a deep draught of water from a bucket. Oka water, cold and clear! Then he dressed himself.

While he had been washing, the fog had dispersed. Low clouds were trailing westwards, while the blue sky of August peeped through their breaks. However keenly one might gaze towards the wide spaces beyond the Oka, nothing was to be seen on the road. It remained deserted. There was no trace of the army. It seemed as if there was naught over there behind the blue-black crests of the forests.

At this very hour Begich crossed the River Vozha.

Chapter XIV

THE VOZHA

BEGICH STRAINED HIS EYES TO SEE INTO THE DISTANCE. FOG, NOTHING BUT FOG! Cold, raw, and penetrating, it rose from the ground.

The Horde began to stir. Warriors vaulted on to their horses. Troop after troop galloped forward at the word of command. They would suddenly appear before Begich and immediately disappear into the mist as though swallowed up by the air.

Ceaselessly, the importunate neighing of horses, the shouts of men, and the thud of cavalry passed him by.

With his short legs, his abnormally broad shoulders, his round head, and his slanting eyes, Begich stood his ground. Greedily he sniffed the air of this alien land. From soil, grass, and air he caught an indefinite and strangely oppressive smell. It was not the scent of the steppe, nor the odour of the forests through which he and his legions had passed. From somewhere in front, whether near or far away none could tell, came the reek of burned wood or the smoke of camp fires.

The horsemen who cantered past were not all fully awake. Their faces were reddened with the cold. Some were still adjusting their weapons, while others tightened their saddle-girths.

"Our cavalry looks fine at a canter," thought Begich. For years he had been endeavouring to master the Russian language. "The Russ would have said 'Good are Tukhton horses at canter.'"

In the background a warrior held Begich's charger. The piebald steed's nostrils quivered. The soldier knew nothing of horses but the bridle and the lash. Forming a group in the rear stood the princes of the Horde—the murzas—rising in their stirrups. Some among them knew Persian and Turkish languages. Begich turned to Khazi-Bey to ask:

"Do you understand Russian, Prince?"

"I speak to them not with my tongue but with my whip."

"How long is it since you last spoke to them?"

"We have too many of them at the Horde."

"Those are prisoners, Prince."

"They are all alike."

"But have you seen their warriors?"

Khazi-Bey pointed to the cavalry that was passing by, and said:

"We need but look upon these to have no reason to worry about the others."

Begich frowned.

It took a messenger a long time to find Begich, what with the noise and the fog. At length one galloped up.

"My report. Our first patrol tried to cross the river, but the ford is guarded."

"Did you try to overpower the sentinels?"

"They've dug themselves in and thus prevented us from approaching the bank."

"Did you seek another ford?"

"Our men have gone to search downstream."

Khazi-Bey asked the messenger:

"What is the name of the river?"

Begich replied:

"The Vozha."

Murza Karahaluk cast a contemptuous glance at Begich.

"One might suppose," he said, "that Prince Begich intends to enter Dmitri of Moscow's service. He is learning the language of the Russ and remembers all the Russian rivers."

"Precisely! Because Begich does not wish to serve Dmitri."

"Each of us understands a commander's duty according to his lights," observed Murza Kastriuk, in defence of Begich.

The messenger was still standing before them holding the horse's bridle when a second messenger came riding up.

"I have to report that a ford has been found. We saw the Russ on the farther bank. We shot our arrows and they went away."

Khazi-Bey slapped his knee.

"They always turn tail at our approach. There was no need to have wasted arrows on them. Show them the lash and they will retreat."

The warrior's lips were twisted into a wry smile, but he continued to look steadily into Begich's eyes.

"Were there many Russ?"

"It's foggy. We saw three."

Begich eyed the group of murzas.

"Khazi-Bey, Mamai's favourite, dresses like a Persian," he mused. "He is not capable of putting on a coat of mail unassisted; slaves buckle his straps; he wears a surcoat over his armour; he is not ashamed to question old soldiers as to the beauty of Russian women who have been taken captive. Tash-bek's sole interest in the army is horseflesh. Karahaluk is a relative of Mamai, who gave him a high post with the cavalry. Kastriuk is powerfully built and brave in battle. He knows how to engage the enemy, but how to circumvent an enemy is beyond him. The only eye of the army is Begich's one eye."

Begich gave a nod to his warriors and they brought him his armour. Throwing off his robe, he swiftly donned his coat of mail, buckled on his sword, sprang into the saddle, and took his remaining arms from a warrior.

"Is there any need to hurry in the case of such people?" asked Khazi-Bey.

But Kastriuk was also arming. Begich was surrounded by his old comrades-in-arms, who were in full war kit.

Without a glance at the murzas, Begich put spurs to his horse's flanks and moved forward into the fog. The princes followed him.

Thus they rode until noon, hardly able to see even the ground underfoot. Then the mist began to clear. The sun came forth. The Tatars crossed the ford.

Behind them the baggage-waggons remained with their nomad possessions, their slaves, their women captives, their own women, their cattle.

In front, on a ridge of humpy hills, stood the Russian army. The sun shone on the Russians from the west and their armour glittered like ice.

From his post on the hills Dmitri watched the Tatars' movements. Picked regiments and the Grand Prince's own bodyguard were drawn up in serried ranks behind him.

The left flank was upheld by Daniel Pronski with horse and foot. The right, under the command of the courtier Timofei Veliaminov and Andrei Algerdovich, Prince of Polotsk, stood ready for the fray.

The priests who accompanied the Orthodox army remained aloof in the background. Their safety depended more upon the crosses worn outside their cassocks than on divine protection. The Tatars spared priests. Palladi, however, who was one of them, had placed himself in the forefront. He was a Greek with dark, curly hair, dissolute and self-seeking.

Begich was aghast at the stern aspect of the Russians' battle array, at their shining armour, at their immovable calm.

Uttering a yell, Kastiuk dashed towards Dmitri while his cavalry, inspired by the fury of his onslaught, was followed by the murzas, the advance guard, and the seasoned companies. A tornado of dust rose in the air. Those in the rear refused to be left behind, and with frantic cries they hurled themselves forward.

The Russ continued to stand stock-still.

Begich struck at his horse with a whip, and swirled round on the same spot.

The Russ waited. They neither ran nor shouted. Such a thing had never happened before! The cavalry of the Horde was accustomed to crumple up all resistance, to rout, betrample, pursue, and surge forward into conquered territories on the heels of the vanquished. But here were men who did not run away. They came neither forward nor retreated backward. They stood there as if it were a wall. But cavalry is not a battering-ram wherewith to beat down a wall.

The advance guard drew rein, while those in the rear, charging into them, were thrown into confusion. Then they moved on cautiously, trying to spy out what game the Russ were up to.

Tatar arrows soared into the sky on feathered wings. So thick and fast did they fly that the sun's light grew dim. But the initial impetus had waned; the chargers twirled in circles and refused to advance. The fiery passion of the onslaught was broken.

Then Dmitri's sword flashed out.

The soft earth reverberated with the heavy thud of hoofs as the Russians swept down the hill to meet the foe.

The restive steeds hurled themselves forward, cramped shoulders relaxed, the ancient battle-cry drowned the uproar among the Tatars.

As one man, the Russians impetuously bore down upon the Tatars. And for many miles around the earth shook and the grass bent as from the wind and the clouds leaped in the sky as the Tatar horses reared up on the ground.

While Kastiuk's warriors were still at grapples with Dmitri's regiments, Dmitri Monastirev had routed Tash-bek. Karahaluk left his rear defence open to Daniel Pronski. Khazi-Bey's horsemen, and Kaverga's spearmen, throwing away their long-shafted spears, which had become useless, defended themselves as best they might with their swords while fleeing towards the river.

Kaverga lashed out at his Tatars.

"Forward!" he yelled.

Some of his men turned back submissively, their shoulders bent. But one, infuriated by the blows, struck at Kaverga's paunch with his sword. The murza threw back his head, then crumpled up in the saddle.

Palladi, the priest, galloping with Dmitri's troop, pounded the heads of the unhorsed Tatars with his heavy cross and overtook Karahaluk.

The Tatars were trying to make good their escape by the river.

Palladi caught sight of the golden chain round Karahaluk's neck. Avverting a cut from a scimitar with his cross, he seized upon the chain with his free hand. At that moment the murza's horse reached the brink of the river. Palladi's steed collided with the horse's chest and, shooting over the animal's neck, the priest himself hit the murza's breast. Both were knocked out of the saddle and rolled down the steep bank to the river. The waters closed over them. On rising to the surface they continued to wrestle. The priest, still clinging to the chain, belaboured the murza, while the murza, choking and spluttering, clutched the Greek's beard with both hands. Thus struggling, they were drowned together in the Vozha.

Begich shouted to his men. Veteran commanders endeavoured to stay the fugitives by facing them.

Then it was that Begich saw Dmitri. The Grand Prince was hotly pursuing Kastiuk's cavalry riverwards. He had lost his helmet, his hair was dishevelled, his eyes screwed up, his mouth was grim. Those were the same lips that had smiled so benignly while Dmitri was visiting the Horde. Those eyes had looked so frankly into Mamai's. Begich could not recognize this man.

Besides, there was no time for recognition, for at that moment an impudent hand seized his bridle. Begich unhesitatingly clave off that hand.

Suddenly a warrior appeared at Begich's side. The face was familiar. It was the face of an old man, and a scar like a pink lizard quivered across the livid cheek. Begich spat over his shoulder. But the warrior seized both Begich's hands, together with his sword, twisted them behind the Tatar's back, and thus led him forth from the fray like a bird which is held by both wings.

Once outside the *mêlée*, Ak-Bugai released his captive.

"I wanted to see, Prince, whether you had not been premature in dismissing me from the ranks."

"How dare you, slave . . .!"

"Beware!"

Begich rushed at him, sword in hand. Ak-Bugai parried the thrust. Begich wheeled his horse and attacked again. And again Ak-Bugai parried the blow. And when Begich attacked for the third time a sword flashed before his eyes and cut through his skull from ear to ear. Convulsively his clenched hands pulled at the bridle; the force made the horse rear and sent the headless body of Begich rolling to the ground.

Ferocious hand-to-hand fighting was meanwhile continuing on the banks of the Vozha.

Kastiuk, having reached the shore, veered his horse about and, though surrounded by the Russ, began single-handed to clear a way out. He chopped

off arms, slashed at shoulders, heads, dug his heels into the horse's flanks in an endeavour to make it advance on the Russian lines. Thus doing, he repelled the onslaught and hacked his way out. Then somebody, snatching a long-shafted spear from a Tatar's hand, struck Kastruk in the breast. He flopped to earth and was soon reduced to a pulp by the hoofs of stampeding horses.

The Tatars threw away their arms and tried to swim across the river. But their heavy mail dragged them down. Neither were the riders of the steppe used to taking a plunge in Russian rivers.

Thousands upon thousands of Tatars were engulfed in the black depths of the Vozha. The river was choked with their bodies. The water began to rise and gurgled.

Even in the twilight the Tatars were still beating off attacks on shore or drowning in the Vozha.

Dusk fell. But men still fought in the dim light while the waters still frothed.

Night came. It became impossible to distinguish Tatar helmet from Russian. Then did the slaughter cease. Night alone hindered pursuit of the stricken foe. The Russians halted. Before them stretched the dark spaces into which the Tatars had disappeared; behind lay Russia; and between Russia and the army lay the battlefield.

Throughout the night, calls, groans, and wails rose and echoed over the field. They called to the living and to those who would answer no more. Athwart the inky darkness of the field of strife, lamentations wove and interwove in one long wail.

A blast of horns issued forth to gather the dispersed warriors. Camp fires were lit. Patrols cantered off after the retreating enemy.

Dead Monastirev was carried to Dmitri's bivouac. Gaunt and pale, he was little changed, but his parted lips seemed to summon one to follow him. So profound a dread fell upon Dmitri that he crossed himself.

"God rest the soul of the slain boyar . . . Dmitri. . . Ah, it sounds as if the words were intended for myself!"

Again Dmitri crossed himself.

They were calling loudly for Commander Kusahov. They called into the darkness, their faces turned towards Russia:

"Nazar Danilovich!"

But only the echo returned an answer:

". . . i . . . i . . . ich . . ."

Every man was calling to someone in the pitchy night—father to son, friend to friend, brother to brother. But only these voices could be heard, the answering cries being drowned in a heartrending wail which issued from the blood-steeped darkness. It was hard to understand. Were these groans replies to the living call? Or did they come from the souls of the dead in lament over their forsaken bodies? Or was it Russia, from far away across the field, weeping over her dead children?

A warrior, tousled and grey-haired, casting aside his helmet, stepped with some of his companions outside the ring of fires to the fringe of night. He dropped to the ground, and addressed his severed hand:

"Oh, my left hand, where art thou? Where art thou lying, my own? Many an acre hast thou ploughed and harrowed. Where art thou now? Ah, thou, my own left hand! Better to have been killed outright than to live without thee. What am I now? I am neither warrior nor ploughman. . . ."

He buried his face in the grass, but none came nigh him, for each was

burdened by his own grief. Each sent out cries into the darkness. Many tottered away to grope among the dead and the wounded.

Lights flickered and then grew faint.

Leeches applied herbs to injuries, tied up arteries, uttered charms to stop the flow of blood, sifted warm ashes on to gaping wounds.

The priests wandered about, succouring the dying and hastening to give absolution.

"All thy sins are forgiven thee, my son, in so much as thou hast laid down thy life for thy motherland, now and for evermore, world without end."

Some still had strength enough to murmur the response :

"Amen."

Many slept, worn out with the fighting, and lay peacefully outstretched on the grass. Others overhauled their armour or examined their mounts. The horses were vicious, reared at the approach of their owners, wrenched at their halters, rattled the chains which tethered them. Maybe they scented carrion or sniffed the rank odour of prowling beasts of prey.

By the glow of the camp-fires one could see that a thick fog was descending upon the earth.

At the first glimmer of dawn Dmitri roused his troops.

Laggards were loth to cross the dark river where the horses tripped over the bodies of the slain and where both banks were black with corpses. The horses snorted and men's hearts grew faint within them as they sensed familiar lineaments among the sprawling dead.

The troops had taken up their stations. Yet even now, as day broke, pursuit was out of the question. As yesterday morning, dense fog shrouded the ground. Nothing was visible.

Could it be that the Tatars had rallied and were preparing for a fresh blow ? Perhaps they were within an arrow's flight. Perhaps within touch of an outstretched arm.

Waiting was a wearisome business. Yesterday's waiting had been agog with anticipation, for the enemy was advancing and in full view. The Russians had awaited their onslaught in a frenzy of rage. Today the waiting was enough to damp any man's spirits. Yesterday one waited in the expectancy of battle ; now, in the foreboding of battle.

The patrols had not yet returned. The advance scouts had melted into the fog and no news came of them. A second party was sent. Still no tidings. It was as if they rode away straight into a dragon's jaws.

The sun was near the meridian when the mist began to clear. At this very moment the first scouting party returned, closely followed by the second. They had scoured the country and found no trace of the Horde.

Dmitri, as before, rode with the advance guard, keeping Pronski and Timofei Veliaminov on either flank, though slightly behind him. He advanced cautiously, for he expected an ambush or an outflanking movement or some wily trap set by the Horde.

The mist became thinner and thinner. No trace of the Tatars !

The cavalry changed their pace to a canter. The foot soldiers started to run. Catch up with the enemy and annihilate him !

But the forests were silent. The broad acres of the Rias Plain lay ahead. It was strewn with abandoned transport and supplies.

Horseless waggons, overturned tents, goods and merchandise piled on carts or scattered on the ground, tilt-carts and nomad tents, straying cattle, weapons thrown on to the sward, beves of slaves crouching behind vehicles, screaming

women taking to their heels . . . All the incalculable wealth of the invincible army of the Horde forsaken and relinquished by its owners in their haste to increase the pace of their horses the quicker to flee this accursed place. . . .

Scorning the booty, the cavalry dashed on to overtake the enemy. Others made for the prisoners, the waggons, and the herds. Yet others trailed after squealing Tatar women to taste the sweets of Horde love. Carpets and gold from the marquees of princes, slaves peering from behind cartwheels, shouts and calls on every hand. . . .

One Tatar warrior alone was found among the captive women and slaves. Clutching at the hands and leg-wrappings of his captors, he besought them to lead him to their commander before being killed.

"We've taken hundreds of your ilk. Our Prince does not own sufficient ears to hearken to each," replied the troopers.

He might easily have come to his death in battle, but none fancied killing him in cold blood. Though he was an enemy warrior, now he was a helpless greybeard with an old scar quivering on his cheek. He must be treated as an old man should be, with good nature and compassion.

Some of the Russ tried to speak Tatar to him. When he took their meaning, they guffawed with pleasure.

In the end they decided to ask Pronski what to do with him.

Pronski, with his broad chest, huge beard and rubicund face with the glow of success upon it, lolled on a rich carpet and ordered the men to bring in the prisoner.

"Who are you?" he inquired.

"I was a subaltern under Begich."

"Your name?"

"Ak-Bugai."

"Never heard of any bearing that name."

"How can one know everybody in the Horde?"

"We do—never you fear!"

"Oh . . ."

"What do you want?"

"Were I to return to the Horde, I should be killed. I am quite accustomed to kill, but not to being killed."

"Well, what may be your request?"

"I would like to be in the Russian army."

"How comes it that you go in fear of your own folk?"

"They may have seen me during the fray. I killed Begich."

"What's that you're mumbling?"

One of the soldiers confirmed the man's statement.

"'Tis the truth he speaks, Prince. Rumour had it that Begich was slain. Our own men witnessed the fight."

Pronski said to Ak-Bugai:

"Come into my camp for a while."

Forgetting his fatigue, Pronski vaulted into the saddle and galloped off to find Dmitri.

The Grand Prince was strolling about the field with Andrei Polotski, knocking off withered flowers with his whip.

"Have you heard, Dmitri Ivanovich, that 'tis rumoured Begich is slain?"

Dmitri replied coolly as though things could not have gone otherwise:

"What did we strive for if this news takes you by surprise?"

"But is it true?"

"I have his sword fastened to my saddle already."

"They've brought me a Tatar prisoner who confesses to having slain him."

"Ay, that's what the old man sang in Kolomna: 'We slew Tatar with Tatar.' It is most vexatious. I should have granted him his life. Come along, and let us have a look at the Golden Horde as it lies among the green feather-grass of a Russian field."

Pronski said thoughtfully:

"Yes, to him such a fate would have been more bitter than death."

Two of the captive women squatting between the waggons did not avert their faces, but looked the victors in the eyes joyfully.

"Little fathers! Where do you hail from?"

"And you? Where do you come from?"

"From the village of Kurchava."

"Where may that be?"

"In heaven! This very night the Tatars sent it up in smoke. They dragged us on and on. In a single day we've had two masters."

"Are you safe?"

"Quite safe, God ha' mercy on us!"

"Then why do you wear Tatar rags?"

"The Katuni wrapped us up in their worn-out clothes."

"Well, what do you expect us to do with you?"

"Since our village is no more, won't you take us along with you?"

"To Moscow?"

"Where else?"

"Well, we'll decide later where, my Kurchava beauties."

"Now then, warrior, don't try seduction on me."

"What about it?"

"Do you think it was for your sake that we saved ourselves from the Tatars?"

Timofei the courtier returned late from the chase. It was nearly nightfall. He had overtaken a small number of wounded and foot-sloggers. All the other Tatars had vanished. On the ground was the trail of their going, and the abandoned baggage alone marked the way they had taken.

Dmitri smiled at Polotski.

"You see how matters have turned out, Andrei Olgerdich."

"My grandfather, Hedemin, used to say: 'While making ready, prepare for the worst.'"

"I know the adage well," laughed Dmitri.

"It is with this saying in mind that you have come out victorious. Otherwise you would not have been so firm and self-assured."

"As the Scriptures say: 'God helps those that help themselves.'"

They remained another three days on the battlefield.

The priests conducted services for the dead. The smoke of incense curled up into the clear blue sky. The wounded were laid on carts.

The herds which had strayed into the woods were rounded up. Booty was loaded into waggons. Pits were dug to serve as fraternal graves.

Dmitri stood at the head of the army while the burial service was being said. With bitterness in his heart he sprinkled a handful of earth into the common grave.

Overhead the heavens were bright. Kites circled low on leisurely wings.

Dmitri gave the order to march. The heavy horns were raised aloft, and for the last time that field heard their prolonged and savage blast.

Chapter XV

NEWS OF VICTORY

OVERGROWN WITH GRASS WAS THE STREET ALONG THE SIDES OF WHICH NARROW, winding paths peacefully meandered. The wooden framework of the well was covered with a bluish mould. Women loafed round the well. They had not come to draw water, for there were no buckets near them.

Kyrill walked along studying the fences, the palings, and the grey walls of the cottages. Which was Aniuta's wall? Which her kitchen garden? He stopped to listen. Perchance her voice would ring out from somewhere. . . .

One of the women hailed him:

"Have you just come from the market-place, brave fellow?"

"What makes you think I'm a brave fellow?"

"Your bearing and your appearance."

"You're a smart one!"

"You come from the market-place?"

"Ay."

"What did they say about the war?"

"The Tatars will be beaten, so they told me."

"Is that so?"

"What do you yourself think?"

"Who can tell?"

"I can. They'll be beaten. A Tatar was caught in the market."

"Oh, God Almighty!"

"He was caught, so that danger is over."

"Thanks be! But we keep on listening. Is nobody crying out?"

"And what if they do?"

"We'll run for it."

"Whither?"

"To the forests. They'll not find us there."

"But what if they do?"

"We'll tear them to pieces. Never shall we give in."

"What does it matter? They're naught but men. . . ."

"Tatars? Don't catch your meaning."

"Where are your men-folk?"

"Gone to kill the Tatars."

Kyrill reflected: "One might suppose they'd gone on a bear or a beaver hunt. Women! They don't know the difference."

"Where does the widow Aniuta live?" he asked.

"Why do you want to know?"

"Oh, I gave her my breeches to wash."

"Young man, that must have been a long while since."

"Why?"

"Well, she's been gone a year now."

"How's that?"

"She gave a young fellow away and he was executed. So everyone gave her the go-by."

"What kind of a fellow was he?"

"An unfrocked monk sought her in marriage, but she betrayed him and he was taken back to the monastery."

"Oh," remarked Kyrill knowingly. "I've heard that tale before. Where did she go back to?"

"Either to Ryazan or to Berezan."

"But who took her in?"

"Her parents."

Kyrill's heart missed a beat. Could she be dead? But the woman prattled on:

"Her father helps a corn-chandler in some market or other."

"Well, good-bye and good luck to you, ladies."

"Oh, we're all right. It's you we are worried about."

"Why?"

"Because you've lost your breeches. She's taken them to Ryazan."

Peals of laughter rose from the gathering round the well. But Kyrill thought to himself: "Verily has she washed away the dirt from my soul. I'll not find my soul till I find her."

Again he put his question, this time sternly:

"So it's really true, you giggling geese, that she has gone?"

"Yes, it is the solemn truth. She went just before St. Elijah's Day. A caravan of merchants was going there with wares and she joined their party. That was a year ago."

"But do you know where was her house?"

"It is lower down the river. You can see it from here. The thatched one."

The woman raised her hand and pointed out the spot, while Kyrill bethought himself:

"She's a comely wench. Maybe she, too, will soon be widowed. Perhaps, though she may not know it, she is already a widow."

Thanking her, he went on his way. He turned into a side-alley and, climbing between two fences, approached Aniuta's thatched cottage.

Chickens were scratching the earth beneath the apple tree in the garden. They scuttled away when he opened the gate.

An elderly woman approached, looking at him severely and guardedly.

"Good day, sister."

The woman bowed in silence. It would have been unbecoming to start talking business straight away. But the woman was alone and gazed at him suspiciously. These were troublous times, so Kyrill hastened to speak.

"I just wanted to ask you about Anna. D'you know where she is?"

"What's your reason for asking?"

"She promised to do some washing for me. That's why I came."

"She's been gone a long while ago."

"But where is she?"

"I can take in your washing."

"Suits me all right. I'll bring it along."

"By all means."

He turned to go, and asked as if reluctantly:

"What's become of her—of Anna?"

"She's gone to live with her brother in Ryazan."

"Is she living in the town itself?"

"In the suburb beyond the city wall. Her brother's a gardener."

"Did he ever live here? I don't seem to remember him. What is his name?"

"Gordenei."

"Never heard of him."

"He didn't live here long. Anna was from Ryazan, too. She was married here. But she was unlucky."

"Why, what happened?"

"You can judge for yourself. They had been wedded but eighteen months when her husband was killed. She hardly had time to find out what sort of a fellow he was before she became a widow. She's been a widow for almost three years. Her brother's wife has just died and she has gone to look after the children. A young woman has not much of a life if she must stay with a strange family."

Kyrill had never heard any details about Aniuta's life. All this was new to him. All that had hitherto been lacking he now knew.

"And what may you be doing here, sister?"

"These people have taken us in, our own village having been burned down. My husband is an old man. I am his third wife. He's the ferryman, Ignati Vozha. D'you happen to know him?"

"Of course I do!"

"Well, that's a good thing."

"I'll be getting along. Good day to you, sister."

"Don't forget to bring your washing. I'll do it for you."

"Ay, that I will."

Kyrill took his departure. He now knew the way to Aniuta. All of a sudden the world seemed to him a spacious place. He sauntered on deep in thought, wondering whither he should go. Never had he realized that he had come here solely on her account, that his life was empty without her.

The day was drawing to a close. The gilded dome of the Church of the Resurrection glowed fiery red. Mist rose from the junction of the rivers.

The tavern was crowded. Indeed, all the bath-houses, churches, and inns were thronged with people. Kyrill sat down near the door. The tavern-keeper came up to him with a servile and flattering demeanour.

"Is your throat dry, sir?"

"No. Let me sit here quietly for a while."

"The mutton is very good today."

"All right, give me some."

"I'll see what's to be had. Would you fancy a little horseradish with it?"

"You are very persuasive."

"That's a host's business in life. Shall I get you mead to wash the horseradish down?"

"It wouldn't be a proper meal without something to drink."

"True enough."

As Kyrill sat near the door he watched the evening drift slowly past.

An old man, wearing a high cap with a round crown such as pilgrims wear, entered the tavern. A birch-bark sack was slung over his shoulders. He tapped the ground with his stick as he walked, creating the impression that he was blind. But he looked searchingly at the customers gathered round the table. Soon he was sitting at Kyrill's side.

He heaved a sigh of relief as he slumped into his seat amid the racket of boisterous voices and drunken cries. Then he said to Kyrill:

"Shall I sing you a lay?"

A hush fell upon everyone in the room. The minstrel's voice, which at first came falteringly, waxed firmer, clearer, and louder as he warmed up to the song. The melodious song flowed along like a quiet river, like a long road leading far away.

The road could be seen from the doorway. It was the one taken by Anna when she went away bearing her shame with her. She had been put to shame by her neighbours. They had foisted this shame upon her because they thought she had betrayed her sweetheart. But Kyrill had never been her sweetheart. She had become dear to him only now. So dear, indeed, was she to him that his heart and not his throat felt dry without her. The road stretched away into the distance. There stood Aniuta's Ryazan. Dubok, another town, lay on the banks of the Don. Grain is brought to Dubok from all the upper reaches and sent down the river in boats and barges. She was gone. Yet she was wont to take her walks abroad here within these very walls. Here she had grieved over the death of her husband and mourned the loss of Kyrill when he had been seized. Her shadow had moved on these walls. Yet she was here no more. The print of her feet in the dust was effaced, and her voice no longer heard. What was she like? For a moment he could not remember. All he recalled were the golden strands of hair escaping from the headdress about her temples, the soft down on her tanned cheeks. At the corners of her mouth were deep dimples. Suddenly the melodious song of the minstrel called up the whole vision of her before him. Her gaze beneath thick eyebrows; her dark, steady, tranquil eyes. Her dry lips, strong chin and neck. And the square shoulders, not sloping like those of other women. The high, almost virginal breasts under the embroidered blouse; and the long slit at the collar through which she had never pulled out a breast to suckle a babe, for she was childless.

The old man was singing about how Aliosha Popovich gave instructions to Batiga :

"And thou, Batiga, filthy cur,
Dare not to spoil our Kiev town,
Foul not our Mother Dnieper's stream,
Let slip the Tatars into Kiev the beautiful,
The boyars let them slay and hang,
And shake with might and main the merchants,
Take from them their silver and gold,
Take from them their fiery steeds,
Destroy their mansions with the gilded roofs . . ."

By the time the Tatars had ridden into Kiev, had annihilated its walls, its churches, and its dwelling-houses, bringing back with them rich booty from the ruined countryside, darkness had fallen.

The singer's straggly wisps of hair swayed to the lilt of his song. He sang gravely and sternly as if all these things had happened long ago and could not have taken place in any other wise. Aliosha found that Batiga had not kept his word, had not limited his activities to killing the boyars and merchants, but had laid waste the whole countryside, destroyed Kiev, and darkened the Dnieper with Russian blood. The old man's voice rose suddenly, growing in volume and power. The hearts of the audience throbbed. It seemed as though the song were being composed on the spur of the moment; that each one should dash forth and hurl himself on the faithless dog Batiga, catch him by the feet, and use him, as a sword is used to clear a way through woodlands, to clear the streets of Tatars, till Batiga would beg :

"Tame thy wild and mettlesome rage,
Take from me thy lily-white hands,
Leave some Tatars here alive
That thus our race may not die out. . . ."

There came a deep sigh from a dark corner of the tavern :

" 'Twould be well to tear them up root and branch so that no seed might be left !"

Meanwhile the tavern-keeper kindled birch-bark by applying it to some glowing charcoal and lit the cresset. Kyrill could now see that his tankard had been drained and that all the mutton was eaten. The host had evidently mixed something with the mead to make it more intoxicating. Kyrill's head ached and his temples throbbed.

The singer took a bowl and a hunk of bread from the hands of the host and moved to the door. Kyrill watched him attentively.

The old man sat on the threshold and, wrapped in the warm evening mist, he crumbled his bread into the soup. When the pieces were well soaked he picked them out of the bowl with his bony black fingers and ate slowly, sipping up the soup as he ate. Kyrill bent towards him, saying :

"Where do you get the strength to sing, grandad ?"

"From within me, son."

"You must have a great inside."

" 'Tis not greater than our Mother Russia, but about the same size."

"Thank you, grandad."

"What for, my dear fellow ? Have you not the same ?"

"Who knows ? I've never given it a thought."

"You ought to. Bad is the man who bears not all Russia within him. He's worse than a Tatar."

The old man handed the empty bowl to the tavern-keeper.

"Take it, kind friend."

"Whither are you going now ?"

"On my journey."

"In the night-time ?"

"To a blind man even the day is dark. But one who has his sight can find his way in the dark."

"Still, it must be rather alarming."

"Going into battle is yet more alarming. But thousands have gone and are not afraid of being slaughtered. What has a lonely old man to fear ?"

"But you are not going to battle."

"I am, son, I am going to battle. Some strike with a spear, others with their brain, others again might deal their blows with their voice. I must be going. Perchance I shall sing in another place where I can spend the night."

He went out, his staff tapping as he walked. His pilgrim's cap, which resembled a kidney bean, was disappearing in the gloom when Kyrill sprang to his feet and hastened after him. Catching sight of the minstrel, he cried :

"Grandad !"

"What is it, my son ?"

"May I ask you something ? Just now you were singing about the Tatars, and how they used a Russian knight to rob the boyars and merchants in Kiev. I never heard of this before."

"But he ordered him not to touch Kiev—Russia. Can a foe judge who is right and who is wrong ? If your enemy be a Christian, strangle him yourself with your Christian hands. Never seek help from a foe. Russia will never be bettered by a stranger's hand. That was the meaning of my tale."

"But can she not be bettered ?"

"You are too curious."

"Methinks there was a time when there were neither merchants nor princes."

"You are right. The people, so they say, dwelt in the forests. They lived without merchants or princes."

"Will the time ever come when there won't be any of them again?"

The old man shook his head, while his eyes rested on Kyrill:

"God wills that it should be so, and thus it is."

"It's not written anywhere. There's nothing about Russian princes in the books."

"Not written anywhere?" The old man smiled. "And what do the priests tell us? Have you read about how they used to kill princes? Brutus slew Caesar. Many Roman Caesars were killed. May it not have been the same with Russians? One cannot remember everything. It has not been written down anywhere."

"I see, you are a bookworm."

"If Dmitri wins, he will rise very high. He will build towers with our bones."

"If Dmitri doesn't rise, Ivan will . . . or Vasili who is growing up. But so long as princes build towers, there will be no pity for your bones."

"Perhaps the people will come to understand that a prince's strength lies in his people. If the people give no strength to the Prince, where is he to get it from?"

"What are we to do then, grandad?"

"The people has to realize its own strength. That takes time. Quarrel with your Prince when there is peace, but when the enemy is at the gates—hold fast by your Prince. But know the tune . . . Go back to the tavern. You have not paid your reckoning, have you?"

"Well, good-bye, grandad."

"Off with you! Off with you!"

But Kyrill did not return to the tavern. He walked along in the fog, lost in thought.

"Women and I. We are the only ones who are not bearing the blows this day. Is it worthy of me to hide in taverns when I have so much strength and power?"

He recalled how he had yearned for his country, for his mother-tongue, when he was among the Greeks in Constantinople. How unbreathable was the air outside one's motherland! "If they beat us this time, their yoke will be harder than ever. Oh, those infamous Tatars!"

The sound of voices came from the square. Kyrill stopped. Suddenly the church bells rang out in the darkness. It was not the tocsin. What might this untimely ringing presage? He hurried towards the cathedral.

Without warning, a horseman emerged from the night and galloped past him, to be swallowed up again in the gloom. Several more followed him.

"A messenger?"

Kyrill rushed towards the people. The church bells still pealed forth. The priests had already begun to intone a hymn of thanksgiving for victory. The messenger, while changing his horse, had had time to inform them that the armies had made contact. The town was alert with cries.

"They're fighting!"

"Where?"

"About fifty miles away."

"How's that?"

"They've just sent to say that the armies have met."

Cries and lamentations rose from among the women; the various sounds of their wailing came from all directions,

The messenger and his escort made all speed, in spite of the dark, to bear the tidings along the forest tracks towards Moscow, the animals scuttling away from under the galloping horses' hoofs. The bells rang all through the night. The churches were crowded. Everybody hastened to light a taper or to arrange for a service. As the new day dawned, another courier reached Kolomna.

"Our side is winning."

"Is that really true?"

"Glory be to God!"

"They'll win, never you fear. The enemy is in full flight."

"What about our Kolomna men? Has anyone seen them?"

"How can one see anybody?"

"D'you know Misha Kuverda?"

"Never heard of him."

"And Proshka? Do you know him?"

"No, I come from Suzdal."

"So our men are winning?"

"They are beating the accurst infidel."

"God hold us in His safe keeping."

In the course of the day it became known that the retreating Tatars were being hotly pursued.

Leaves were falling and drifting on the white mist. Church bells continued to peal everywhere and the air was filled with the sound of merry voices and people hailed one another. It was as though a happy Easter Sunday in early spring were being celebrated, full of peaceful, solemn sounds from the bells.

Dmitri's troops had not yet left the banks of the Vozha. None the less, witnesses of the fight streamed into Kolomna. Their advent was greeted with every sign of eagerness, and the tales, in which truth was interlarded with hopes and dreams, were believed by all.

"Thousands of Tatars have been slain, brothers. Thousands have been drowned or trampled underfoot. Incalculable is the massacre. All the Tatar princes have perished. The Horde will cease to exist."

Messengers dashed into the town. They changed their mounts quickly and hurried away to Moscow. The men argued with each other.

"You off-saddle. I'll gallop to Moscow, for I've already had a rest."

"I am not tired."

"Not after galloping fifty miles?"

"I've told you I'm going. A fresh horse!"

With which he leaped into the saddle and was away, leaving only the clatter of his horse's hoofs behind him.

Kyrril followed them with his eyes. Moscow lay beyond the forests.

Chapter XVI

OLEG

ON¹ AUGUST 12, OLEG IVANOVICH, GRAND PRINCE OF RYAZAN, RECEIVED TIDINGS of the battle of the Vozha. Dmitri's soldiers were still scouring the woods skirting the river when a messenger was describing the rout of the Tatars to the Prince.

The news of Dmitri's victory was a bitter pill for Oleg to swallow. But he heard the worst standing with his customary unimpeachable dignity and his eyes opened wide in a fixed stare under his bushy brows.

Tall, spare, sinewy, he dressed in dark raiment and therefore looked even slenderer and more austere. He had assumed the office of Grand Prince the year Dmitri was born. His face had a yellowish tinge and appeared swarthier in contrast with the silver threads which twined among his raven-black hair. His pointed beard stuck forward like a spike. A crimson mole quivered on his left cheek.

"And is Dmitri Ivanovich in good health?"

The messenger guessed that the news of Dmitri's death or wounds would act like a soothing balm on Oleg. But it behoved him not to betray his surmise, so he answered passively:

"Alive and well!"

"God be praised! Did he himself take an active part in the fighting?"

"As usual, he took his place at the head of his men."

"Many slain?"

"Few Muscovites. But hosts of Tatars. Few escaped. Eminent murzas are among the dead, so 'tis said."

"Have you heard who were slain?"

The courier enumerated their names. Oleg exclaimed:

"Mamai's favourites!" But he immediately regretted this indiscretion due to excitement. He dismissed the messenger and withdrew to the window. There he stood leaning on the sill.

His oaken mansion, built of huge age-old beams, rose above the Oka. Over young tree-tops and the fortress walls the view expanded towards the river. Barks, their patched sails trimmed, drifted downstream to join the Volga. The wind had set in from the north.

"Even the breezes are kind to him," thought Oleg. "I expect the Tatars' arrows were deflected by a favourable wind."

He turned away from the window. The wooden walls were hung with heavy carpets. They had been given him by the murza Salakhmir of the Horde.

It had taken but a day to change the world. While the Horde rose proud and powerful in the east, Moscow did not present much of a menace. Wars with Tver diverted Dmitri's attention from Ryazan. Were he to turn his sword against Ryazan, an alliance with the Horde would afford protection. Now the whole outlook had altered. The Horde had been bested and Oleg stood face to face with Dmitri. Dmitri's Moscow had arisen out of the forests and was now superior to every other town in Russia. Gathering unto herself both towns and principdoms, she had become the head of the Russian lands. She was a menace!

"Why should not Ryazan be at the head? It is a more ancient and famous city than Moscow. It has shed more of its life-blood in Russia's cause."

Oleg loved his people, their brisk, soft dialect, the wide river flowing down to the hot steppes. The Horde had come with fire and sword. Beloved Ryazan with her equally beloved townships had been soaked with blood. Yet, over the charred ruins, Oleg had risen again as Grand Prince.

"There is still the Grand Prince of Tver. But how long will Dmitri tolerate three grand princes in our single Russian land?"

An idea flashed through Oleg's mind:

"What about striking at him now, before he has had time to recuperate after Vozha?"

Then he recalled how the messenger had said that the Muscovites had sustained few casualties. Moreover, the disgrace inflicted upon Ryazan folk by Moscow was still fresh in their minds. That was when Bobrok completely routed Oleg and chased him from his own principedom to install the accursed Volodka Pronski in his stead. Treating him as if he were already dead! Had Salakhmir not aided Oleg with Tatar troops he would have been powerless to oust Pronski. But then while one group of Tatars had helped, another had invaded, burned Ryazan to ashes, and mauled Oleg himself so badly that the wounds remained unhealed for six years. Life was terrible and a burden. Had Dmitri been defeated the Horde would have been strengthened, and Oleg, too, would have wielded more power.

The course of Oleg's meditations was interrupted by the entrance of the priest Sofroni from the Cathedral of the Archangel. He was a great reader and revelled in intrigue, the first to ferret out everything concerning all and sundry. It was pleasant to talk with him, for he caught your meaning half-way. But Oleg had no wish for anyone to divine his present thoughts. Bowing first to the ikon and then to the Prince, the priest stopped humbly at the door. Oleg approached him to receive his blessing. Sofroni smiled and signed, for he was dubious as to Oleg's state of mind.

"I am at your service, Father Sofroni."

"I am in doubt as to how we ought to react to the news of this battle, Oleg Ivanovich."

"That is the bishop's concern."

"But you are the father of the people of Ryazan."

"God should be praised. The infidel has been overthrown."

"The very words our bishop used."

"I am not surprised."

"Methinks Dmitri will now be exalted."

"He deserves to be."

"True. He himself led the fray. Shall we order the bells to be rung for a thanksgiving service?"

Oleg knit his brows.

"The bells might crack."

"As you will, Prince."

Again the messenger's words "hosts of Tatars are slain" flashed through his brain. "The Horde will take long to recover."

"Hasten, Sofroni. 'Tis well that the bells of Moscow have not yet started to peal. We'll be ahead of Moscow and she will hear our chimes."

And he thought: "The Horde now has other things to worry about. It will have no time to listen to our bells."

"Hasten," he said.

"I am going at once."

Sofroni again blessed Oleg.

The bishop himself had expressed the wish to celebrate the thanksgiving service. Oleg hastened to make ready for church.

Unlike Dmitri, Oleg did not disdain princely apparel. Dmitri would appear in public with his head uncovered, like a villen. He contemned not a homespun linen garment. He chatted simply with his troops. He did not trouble to keep up appearances. Quite otherwise with Oleg. He donned the full grand princely regalia: green morocco boots embroidered with gold; his coat of Grecian purple trimmed with gold lace; his sword inlaid with gold, his cap of state edged with gold rings. Let Moscow beware and the Horde realize that

neither devastations nor fires nor battles could impoverish the Prince of Ryazan !

Princess Efrosinia had driven to the cathedral in advance. She was arrayed in a robe of cloth of gold which came from Moscow's looms.

Oleg stepped forth surrounded by his Court—boyars, retainers, and relatives. A tall white charger, which glared askance at the people with its fierce blue eyes, was led up to the Prince. He raised himself into the saddle, which was wrought with burnished gold. The charger, caparisoned in a cloth made by the Horde, tugged on the red bridle-rein and stepped slowly towards the cathedral. The courtiers who accompanied him went on foot, for the palace was only some hundred and fifty paces from the cathedral.

After the sack of Ryazan six years previously Oleg had rebuilt the city with oaken walls, churches, and houses. He had caused trees to be planted, gardens to be laid out, and the ponds to be cleansed. On these he had introduced tame swans. He found money to reopen trading relations. The city rose again.

Arrived at the portals of the cathedral, Oleg dismounted on to the outspread carpet and entered. As he did so the bells started to peal, and their deep boom carried far down the Oka's wide expanse to Nizhni-Novgorod, and upstream to Kolomna. The townsfolk, who had gathered in the square to await the Prince's coming, crowded after Oleg into the great shrine.

Equerries slowly led the excited charger away.

Oleg took his place in front of the chancel to the right of Efrosinia. Erect and proud he stood, as though he, and not Dmitri, were the victor. Every success reaped by Dmitri seemed an affront to him. Oleg kept his cap of state on his head.

The bishop, who had been appointed to the see of Ryazan by Alexei, the Metropolitan of the All-Russian Church, issued forth from the sacristy with a train of priests and other clergy in their vestments of gold.

His mitre glittered and his crozier scintillated with gems. Before the service began, the bishop addressed the congregation.

"Brethren and Christians ! The people of the Orthodox Church have won a great victory over the accursed infidel."

Oleg also turned to face the silent people. He approved the opening words of the address. It was not Dmitri who had won, but the people of Russia. That was wisely spoken. The bishop seemed to understand that he was speaking in Ryazan.

Suddenly he pricked up his ears.

"Uniting all together, the folk of Moscow, Suzdal, Tarusa, and Kolomna formed a single front, rallying to the banner of Prince Dmitri of Moscow, and God's blessing was upon them."

Oleg cast down his eyes.

"Never so long as our princes fought separately and on their own account did we gain victories over the Tatars. This is our first complete victory over the Moslems."

Oleg's face flushed a dull red and then went livid with rage.

Thirteen years ago Oleg had been the first to pursue Tagai-khan. He overtook the Tatar in Shishov forest, routed him, seized much booty, and took many prisoners. He had nearly captured Tagai himself, but the latter managed to slip through his fingers. Moscow did not wish to remember this. Could she have forgotten ?

Oleg once more faced the altar. He detested that bishop's voice. Moscow's mouthpiece ! Dmitri had succeeded in bribing even the Orthodox faith. No better than a shopkeeper !

But the bishop continued to harangue the congregation, and his voice sounded loud and joyful :

"The Tatar sun has set, their day is done. The Lord God is on our side."

Oleg repeated in a whisper :

"Their day is done."

The cathedral was now filled with singing, but as soon as that ceased the hated Muscovite voice thundered on.

Scarcely able to keep his feelings under control, Oleg walked up to kiss the cross, averting his gaze from the people, who were gaping at him. The boyars Kobiakov, descendants of the Polovtsian khan Kobiak, artlessly approached to receive the episcopal blessing. The Zhuliabovs, Ryazan boyars from time immemorial, crossed themselves devoutly. The congregation swept noisily after them out of the cathedral. Oleg alone felt defeated. He did not rejoice at the defeat of the Tatars. Yet he had yearned for just such a rout—only it was to have been brought about by his own hand.

Silent and morose, he quitted the church and swung into the saddle. Again the people saluted. The young trees stood fresh and green. Cloud-wreaths floated down the river. A flock of cranes flew overhead, gabbling as they went. Kinsmen and boyars followed in the rear of Oleg's charger.

At this time of year few were the people who remained in town. The boyars and landowners left for their demesnes. Crops were ripening, and this was the moment to collect dues, rents, and poll taxes. The villagers needed the master's eye.

Oleg felt that this autumn things would go easily. The tide of Tatar invasion had ebbed away. The Muscovites had other matters to attend to than molesting Ryazan. They were hastening home to divide the spoils of victory.

He entered Efrosinia's apartments. Evening was closing in, and indoors it was getting dark. But looking through the window he saw the sky aglow with the rosy hues of sunset, below which was a high, level bank of bluish clouds.

"It will probably be foggy again tonight," said Efrosinia.

He made no reply. But she was in a mood for talking.

"I expect Dmitri is making high revel at this moment."

Again he answered nothing. Efrosinia mused awhile, then drew near him.

"Oleg Ivanovich !"

He lifted his eyes to her face and she held him close against her Muscovite robe of gold.

"Take it not to heart, Oleg Ivanovich. Times have been worse than this. It's all to the good. The Tatar chestnuts have been plucked out of the fire by other hands than ours."

"Ay, but we beat the bush while another caught the hare."

"What is that to us ?"

"Have you no eyes to see how destitute is our people? Never given a chance to stand on their own feet! Attacked first by one and then by the other. How is Ryazan to grow? Moscow is growing while Ryazan fends off the blows. Moscow is trading while Ryazan has to guard her treasure-chests. But if no enemy is left, what need of a watchman? In such case we too will be locked up in the chest. To my way of thinking, our former misfortunes were bitter, but the present ones are doubly so."

"I think otherwise. You must seek a reconciliation with Dmitri and then stand shoulder to shoulder."

Oleg was on his feet in an instant.

"I?"

Efrosinia persisted :

"Yes, you yourself, Oleg. You ! He is powerful. We must stand at the back of him, then will Ryazan recover her glory. We must lean on Moscow now."

"Never ! We'll soon see who will stand behind whom."

"But whom have you to count upon ?"

Oleg sought mastery over his feelings by silence. Then he smiled and placed his arm round her.

"On yourself, grandmother !"

Their son Fedor had already grown to young manhood. Oleg was pleased that he and Efrosinia could hold their own in the stripling's company. He would not have called her "grandmother" had she not looked quite young.

Suddenly he spoke, low and resolutely.

"We have no need to lean on anyone. Our own strength suffices."

"You know best."

Efrosinia alone could serve him as confidante. Neither Titei Kozelski, nor in especial Pronski, nor any of his former and present companions, could serve him in such a capacity.

Efrosinia puckered her brows.

"But Volodia Pronski is with them, too. A conqueror !"

Again she had guessed his secret thought. He shrugged his shoulders.

"A strategist !"

And again she voiced his thought :

"Had it not been for Bobrok, that dough would never have risen."

"The same applies to me were it not for you, grandmother."

But the thought persisted :

"Bobrok ! Why, without him Dmitri would be incapable of moving a step. Not for nothing did he attach Bobrok to himself, make him a kinsman by marrying off his own sister to him. Had he not feared defection he would never have done such a thing."

"Could we only find a way to draw him to ourselves . . ."

"I'm afraid for you," chaffed Oleg. "Though his hair is grey, he is still a strapping fellow."

"Enough of your teasing, Oleg Ivanovich. You are making a mock of me. Sit down properly. You are crumpling your lace."

Such moments of intimacy were few and far between. The house was always full to overflowing with kinsmen, guests, retainers, slaves, and soldiery. Ever did somebody or the other have business with the Prince or the Princess.

The day was on the wane. Night was at hand. And night, however strictly you may be guarded, is filled with gloom ; fears and calamities lurk in the darkness. In daylight one can see so very far away, whereas at night every misfortune seems close. How can one hope to protect oneself against it by the transparent petal of flame rising from an oil-lamp placed before an ikon or by the spear of light from the soft shaft of a wax candle ?

Night was drawing on, when sickness overpowers the afflicted, when happiness may smother the happy to death, and misfortunes overwhelm the defeated.

Chapter XVII

KYRILL AND ANIUTA

THE BELLS WERE PEALING FORTH FROM ALL THE BELFREYS; THE PEOPLE WERE rejoicing and weeping; thanksgiving and memorial services were being held in the churches. The advance regiments and long files of baggage-waggons were making their way across the Oka and proceeding along the road to Moscow. Kyrill reached the suburb, looked to his horse, which was still at the inn, and walked slowly up the Moskva river.

His mind was troubled with thoughts of Aniuta. It seemed to him that she ought to have met him but had been detained. He felt worried that she was not with him.

Two years had gone by since he had seen her for the first time. That was in the market-place, whither he had been sent from the monastery to buy salt.

She had been standing gazing at some woodenware spread out on a piece of matting. Brightly painted, neatly made, they were a delight to behold, and so tempting—those buckets, cups, pitchers, pickle-dishes. There she had stood with her squarely-built figure, fine complexion, dark-red lips and moist dimples at the corners of her dry, firm mouth. Her shoulders, neck, and capable hands had surprised him by their impetuous animal strength. The down on her tanned cheeks seemed to promise the same strength.

"She must be passionate in love," Kyrill reflected.

He had come to a halt near her, but she did not turn round to look at him. Of what interest could a monk be? God had created them to practise abstinence. They were neither husbands nor youths.

Kyrill stood near.

"Shall I help you to make your choice?" he ventured.

"I can manage by myself."

"That's a beautiful piece."

"I have no need to brew mead."

"Why?"

"Got nobody to drink it."

"Drink it yourself."

"It's dull drinking alone."

"Well, why not invite me?"

"You're a monk. It would be sinful."

"I'm not afraid."

"But I am."

"Invite me. You have nothing to fear."

"Do not flatter yourself. I'm not that sort."

He had followed her. They glided among the carts full of sweet-smelling hay. He caught her by the hand.

"Come on! Won't you invite me?"

She had not withdrawn her hand, and excited him yet further by saying in a whisper which was full of gaiety, pity, and sadness, while looking round to see that no one noticed them among the hay-carts:

"Why should I invite you? What do you want?"

"To warm myself."

"I am a widow, and I, too, am cold."

"Why not, then?"

"You're a monk. Why should I go with you?"

"If you accept me, you can have my habit for a sarafan."

"That would be a sin."

"I'll shower gifts upon you."

"You'll not have enough."

"But would you take them if I had them to give?"

"I'd have a look at them first."

"I'll give you anything you ask for."

She drew away her hot hand and, for the first time, looked him in the eyes.

"Go away, monk. I am afraid. Begone!"

Turning about, she made all speed to the bustling market-place. Kyrill lost sight of her immediately as though she had melted into the crowd, as if she were but a particle of the milling throng. There he caught sight of a kerchief such as she had been wearing, here were shoulders such as hers, or a hand with the same kind of fingers. It was as if all the people who had been collected together to the making of her had suddenly disintegrated, while he was seeking for her alone.

He asked a cooper:

"There was a swarthy woman standing here. Do you happen to have seen her?"

"Aniuta?"

"Yes."

"She must have gone home. There's nothing for her to do here."

"You know her, then?"

"Who does not know his own townsfolk? I'm not a stranger in these parts."

"Do you know me?"

"This is not the first time you've been here. You're from Golutvin, aren't you? Your name is Kyrill. Every market day you come here for the glory of God."

"This time I've come for salt."

"A monk, even when buying salt, is doing God's work. It's for the brethren."

"Quite right."

"Well, buy something."

"I was not ordered to do so. Don't be vexed."

"So you are not allowed to buy anything else?"

"Forgive me, kind friend."

"God will forgive you."

Thus he had found out her name. Kyrill turned his steps, deep in thought. How willingly she had come away with him to whisper among the wains! She had spoken about the gifts due to love. It all seemed to him so sweet and easy.

"She would have yielded had I not been a monk. The fear of committing a sin alone held her back. Is love a sin, then?"

Thus he had taken with him to the cloister her trustful whisper. Many days passed before he saw her again.

He had spent the night in the ferryman's hut so as to be at the market by dawn. In the morning he fancied he saw a woman walking along the river bank. He followed her in a turmoil, having recognized her gait.

She was going farther and farther afield, and the alders grew thicker and thicker. She went into a willow copse. He crept nearer and saw her untying her kerchief. She loosed her hair, and it rippled in thick waves down her back.

Then, with a swift movement, she threw off her sarafan and stood in her shift, embroidered at the hem. Her bare legs, sturdy and sunburnt, trampled the grass as if they could hardly wait to run to the water. His heart almost stopped beating. He caught his breath when she doffed her shift and stood among the willows, whose leaves gave scant covering to her nakedness. She felt the water with her feet while she folded her arms about her and scratched her armpits. Then she plunged into the stream. Like a goldfish, her arm flashed in the water, and again it flashed as she struck out and she swam slowly and calmly. The current was against her, but she overcame it. She manœuvred with light movements of her lithe body, wrestling with it easily and caressingly. It resisted her stubbornly, but she fought it recklessly.

Then she turned, and with strong quick strokes, as though someone were pursuing her, she reached the bank. Stepping out of the water, she stood still awhile to wring the water from her hair. There was no one about at that hour. The river was deserted.

From his hiding-place Kyrill watched her as she dried herself. Then, as she raised her arms to plait her hair, he stepped from behind the bushes.

Bewildered, Aniuta stood like a stone, gazing at him from under puckered brows.

He placed his foot on her clothing and said softly :

"Aniuta !"

With a cry she slipped away. Her naked body flashed like a stream amid the shade of the trees. But the branches caught her hair. Twigs tripped her feet. Kyrill, coming up with her, seized her by the shoulders. The scent of her womanhood overpowered him as though it were the perfume of hay. Her hands seemed to crumple in his clasp.

"Got you at last !"

"Let me go !"

"Aniuta !"

Terrified, she struggled, vainly trying to push him away. He tore off his monk's belt and bound her hands with it. She calmed down, closed her eyes, and threw back her head.

That was how he had started his love-making.

Breaking away at last, she pushed him over, and quickly and silently disappeared into the thicket.

When he emerged on to the road, he found her standing there. She looked at him, her eyes brimming with tears.

"What have you done ? Why did you do it ?"

"I had no idea that it would happen thus."

"Your gifts are bitter."

"What would you wish me to give you."

At that she had begun to scream, and a crowd soon collected. Kyrill was led away. They took him to Ruza, to the Prince of Moscow's seat, to be a slave. He had felt too abashed to make inquiries about her. Besides, there was no one to ask.

He had been told that she was a young widow. Well, if she were young and a widow, sin would always be lurking round the corner ! She had asked for gifts. That was probably the way she made her livelihood.

Two years had passed since that day.

As then, so now, Kyrill walked through the same thicket and came to the willows with their flexible branches. He recognized the spot and lay down in the grass.

What would he say to her were she lying beside him? How much there was to say, and how few the words a man could command!

Two years had passed since that day, and he had not the strength to rise from the ground.

Transports were passing through the town. The wounded lay in carts covered with matting, others with their sheepskin coats. Their sunken eyes were piteous to look upon. Prisoners were under escort. Through their tattered clothing could be seen the dirty, dark, bruised bodies of a foreign folk. The Tatars appeared frightened and were a sorry sight. Not such would have been their mien had they broken into the town as victors! None pitied them. None gave them either food or drink.

The throng laughed at the Tatar women prisoners in trousers. They ran along barefoot in the dust, the bells tied to their plaits jingling; or they huddled on the carts filled with booty looking like huge birds. Intermittent cries arose in the town, for the people of Kolomna had been in the fight and many of them had fallen on the banks of the Vozha.

It seemed to Kyrill that among the wailing voices he recognized Domna's. But all women's voices are alike when they wail—just as all human grief is alike.

Kyrill rose from the grass and went into the city. As evening closed in, the bells of Kolomna and Golutvin began to ring. A church procession with banners flying and ikons and solemn singing approached the ferry. All Kolomna followed in its wake.

Dmitri crossed the Oka and embraced the Muscovites who had come to meet him. He stooped to kiss short, lean Bobrok.

"I kept the regiments in a horseshoe formation as you had advised, Dmitri Mihailovich. Also I waited so as to attack them from the height. Thanks to you, all has been well with us."

"Do not say that, Prince. You yourself wished them to be placed that way."

"But I doubted whether the plan would work against the Tatars. It was you who persuaded me to the course. Have you forgotten?"

"The formation should be such that the enemy is always prevented from using his customary strength. Every foe possesses his own particular form of strength."

"I feared lest they strike at my flank."

"A horseshoe can always be turned. You mentioned that yourself before leaving Moscow. I had naught to do with it, Dmitri Ivanovich."

"Well, you have all my thanks. You are too modest."

"It's you who are modest, Dmitri Ivanovich."

"And how is Moscow? How are Evdokia, Anna . . ."

"They wept for you, sitting all through the night awaiting messengers. Sergei took up his quarters in Simonov monastery, where he spent the time in prayer."

"And the children?"

"Oh, they're all right. They are in good health and as impish as usual."

"When did you set out for Moscow?"

"Yesterday."

"You must have galloped all the way."

"I was afraid to leave Moscow without you being there. Who knows what may happen? We are surrounded by foes."

"Well, let's be going."

"Sergei has blessed Mitiai. He had first received the Metropolitan's blessing."

"That's even better news than the Vozha victory."

Dmitri became thoughtful. He stood on a carpet in front of a table covered with a fringed and embroidered cloth. The service was about to begin. Dmitri noticed among the crowd a huge man with a mop of thick hair. He bent to Bobrok's ear and asked :

"What is Grisha Kapustin doing here?"

"Mihail Andreich sent him hither to search for a criminal. The messenger you dispatched to Sergei was killed. They are hunting for the man who murdered him."

"God rest his soul !" exclaimed Dmitri, crossing himself.

The clergy, thinking this was the signal to start, intoned the hymn of thanksgiving.

Meanwhile, both transports and troops passed onwards. The carts creaked, the women of Kolomna wept, the bells boomed.

Chapter XVIII

THE HUT

THE PEOPLE OF KOLOMNA WERE SATIATED WITH THE SIGHT OF TROOPS, PRINCES, wounded, and booty. Even a live bear could no longer arouse either interest or surprise. Toptiga had danced among the soldiers, had had its fill of their gifts of food, and was now resting from the turmoil in the village. But Timoshei decided to return to Kolomna.

His step was light and resilient as he pushed his way through the crowd towards the market-place. A gruff voice accosted him quietly :

"Hi ! Timoshei !"

"What do you want?"

Timoshei halted in his tracks, his heart pounding. There before him was Kapustin.

Timoshei knew Grisha Kapustin well, for he had often danced in his presence when performing at the Prince's court.

Grisha sat eating Kolomna buckwheat cakes, washing them down with mead.

"Come nearer, Timoshei. You have nothing to fear."

"That's true enough. My conscience is clear."

"Good ! Did I say anything to suggest the contrary?"

"Good day to you, Grigori Pronich."

"How long have you been in Kolomna?"

"Since the Feast of the Assumption. That'll be two weeks now."

"You are a native-born Kolomnite, are you not?"

"Yes, I'm a local man."

"Are there many strangers here?"

"Can't you see for yourself?"

"What made you run away from Moscow?"

Timoshei was somewhat alarmed. His eyes twinkled affectionately.

"I came along with the army. That's my job."

"Really?"

"What else could me and my bear do, Gregori Pronich?"

"Quite so ! Your explanation suffices."

A harassing thought flashed through Timoshei's head: had the Prince's dog smelt a rat?

"Have you seen a dark, unkempt peasant wearing a ring anywhere about?"

Timoshei was struck dumb, thinking: "He has found out." But pulling his wits together, said:

"No, I don't seem to have seen anyone like that." Then he reflected for a while and shook his head. "No, I haven't noticed anyone like that, Grigori Pronich. What sort of a person is he?"

"I want him. The Prince wishes to reward him."

"Oh, so that's it! Sorry I haven't met with him."

"Well, if you do, just hurry along to me. Understand?"

"Trust me not to let him slip through my fingers."

"Best keep your eyes open!"

"You seem to be angry with me."

"Get along with you!"

Timoshei's light gait became even more springy.

The proverb which says that a beast always runs into the trap is a very true one.

Kyrill was standing at a market stall looking at some brightly coloured wooden wares spread out on a piece of matting.

"Doesn't matter much what I do," thought he. "I shall leave tomorrow. Just a last look at all these beards I know so well."

"Hi, you, long-beard! What's the price of that red flask?"

"I seem to know your voice."

"You've a retentive memory."

"Yet I can't exactly recollect . . ."

"Can't you? Why, we combed the tails of Elijah's troika horses together in the other world!"

"God ha' mercy on us, what a tongue you have! Come now, buy something."

"What's the price of that red flask?"

The salesman cogitated for a moment. At that very instant Timoshei tugged at Kyrill's sleeve.

"Are you crazy? Why are you showing yourself in the market-place?"

"Why shouldn't I?"

They stepped aside.

"Grisha Kaputin of Moscow is here looking for you."

"What the devil for?"

"He says the Prince wants to reward you."

"My humble thanks to Prince Dmitri Ivanovich."

"You see, he loves you with all his heart, while you . . ."

"The Prince?"

"Well, of course."

"What have you been saying to Grisha?"

"Only that I hadn't seen anyone like you."

"I don't want that particular reward."

"Of course not. The devil take it, whither are you going to escape from it?"

"Don't know myself yet. To Believ, perhaps."

"Why?"

"They say that Lithuania is near there. You just cross a ravine—and farewell Dmitri Ivanovich—good day, Olgerd Litvinich."

"Olgerd is dead."

"A holy place is never empty. One man is buried and another found."

"So you are going there?"

"You said you'd come with me."

"It's too far away. This is my own country."

"I'm not forcing you."

They bade one another farewell. Timoshei followed Kyrill with his eyes.

"He's a bold fellow. Does not even leave the market-place."

Kyrill returned to the stall.

"Well, how much do you want for that thing?"

"The decorated one? What shall I say? One doesn't wish to overcharge a friend. It puts me in a quandary. Have a look at the work."

"Don't haggle. Tell me straight."

"Have you ever met a man who tells his price right away?" exclaimed the hawker, obviously wounded. "That is not the way to sell. I tell you my price, you tell me yours. It's like a kind of conversation, not haggling."

"You have but few wares and yet you want to behave as though you were a merchant," said Kyrill.

"Don't spoil my trade. If you have not the wherewithal to pay, I'm not forcing you."

Kyrill bought the red, embellished flask.

"I shall take it to her," he thought. "I'll kneel before her and bow my head to her feet. 'Forgive me,' I shall say. 'Do not be proud, accept this Kolomna flask. Let's drink mead together for the rest of our lives.'"

Tucking his purchase under his coat, he left the market-place and walked swiftly towards the inn.

The long hand of Moscow which had reached out to find him here would not have so easy a task in searching for him beyond the Oka.

"Have you far to go?" asked the old host, as he watched Kyrill hastily saddling his horse. It was past noon by now.

"No, just in the neighbourhood, Kashir. My brother is ill."

"Why don't you take the way along the Oka?"

"It's quicker through the forest."

He slipped his purchase into the sack, where he had previously stowed some provisions. The rest of his belongings were still in the forest where he had buried them. The horse, by now well rested and fed, cantered along briskly.

At the ferry the peasants pestered him with questions.

"How is it you've soiled your sleeve?"

They persisted in asking him this and that in an endeavour to make him show his hands. But he was on the alert, remembering Timoshei's advice.

He would have slipped the ring from his finger, but it refused to budge. Either his finger had grown fatter or the joint had swelled.

When he reached the Ryazan side of the river he pulled up his sleeve and stretched his fingers. Then, whipping up his mount, he rode on till evening.

At dusk he halted for a rest. During the night the air became colder and his horse's paces were brisker. Grey, heavy dew fell on the meadows above the river, making the grass bend under its weight.

Perevitsk lay behind him. Kyrill felt glad that he had passed through it in the course of the night. The orange moon seemed to sink heavily into the damp grass and its rosy sheen flooded the fields.

At the side of the road, rising above the grass, stood a dark, untidy-looking hut. Above the entrance the skull of a horse stuck on a pole gleamed white in

the darkness. Smoke from a smouldering log curled upwards from the embers of a fire. Kyrill dismounted and called :

"Hi, you there !"

Nobody answered.

Bending down, he peered inside.

"Anyone here ?"

In the centre of the hut was a pit which had been scooped out so that when standing the occupant might not hit the ceiling. Thus a circular seat had been formed and on this lay a huge bearskin.

Kyrill unsaddled and hid his bag among the bushes so that nobody should be tempted to steal it from him. He carried the saddle and cloth into the hut.

He emerged to warm himself at the embers and breathed in the acrid smoke of the dying fire. The huge, mist-wreathed moon was dipping behind the horizon. To the rear of the hut stood hives looking like tree-stumps. "But where is the beekeeper ?"

The smoke and the warmth from the embers made Kyrill feel drowsy. He crept back into the hut and covered himself with the bearskin.

Dawn broke.

Kyrill awoke, heaving and suffocating under a strange weight.

Bending over him he saw a wrinkled face with a scrub of grey hairs, and eyebrows bristling like whiskers.

Kyrill realized that his hands were bound. An old man sat astride his chest.

"Who are you ? Old Nick in person ?"

"Who I am is none of your business. But what are you doing here, I should like to know?"

"Just dropped in for a sleep."

"I did not hear you ask for leave."

"Are you the master ?"

"Who else should I be, d'you imagine ?"

"Possibly a werewolf or maybe Old Nick himself. I don't know, but your mug is offensive to me."

The old man heaved himself off Kyrill's chest. He was small of stature, bow-legged and crooked in the arms. The head above this wizened, frail little body was inordinately large, and he moved about as if bowed down by its weight.

"Gad, if he is not the very image of a spider !" muttered Kyrill in admiration.

The old man peeped through the entrance and whistled. The strident sound carried far and wide.

"That's a summons," mused Kyrill, trying to loosen his bonds. The knots were strongly tied but the ropes had rotted. After a deal of straining Kyrill managed to sever one of the strands. But the old man returned and drew a knife.

"Now will you speak ?"

"Sit down at my feet and listen."

The old man seemed dubious, yet he stooped to seat himself.

Dexterously crooking his leg, Kyrill shot it forth and struck the old fellow full in the chest. He stumbled into a corner, waving his arms. Kyrill thereupon extricated himself from his bonds and dragged the old man to the light.

"Lord forgive me !"

Wrenching the knife out of the old man's hand, he cut through the remaining thongs which bound him. After an interval the old man recovered his breath. His tiny eyes pulsed under the brows like small fry caught in a net.

"Come on now," Kyrill said, "tell me who you are. I came for a night's rest, and you bound me."

"Well, you are bold and full of guile."

"D'you think I should be afraid of the likes of you?"

"Mind what you say. You may regret it afterwards."

"What, on your account?"

"No, on your own."

"Why did you bind me?"

"We tether a horse to prevent it going too far afield."

"Have it as you will. But I'm going to find out what this dream forebodes."

He took a strap of well-tanned leather instead of the rotting tow and bound the hut-holder tightly.

"Plenty of time to strangle you. But first I'm going to see whether you can be of some use. What's your name, Old Nick?"

"Just that."

"I'd give it you . . . Oh, very well then, lie there awhile."

He went out and sat down at the entrance. The morning dew had begun to fall. Through the trailing mist the green sky was visible. Kyrill's horse responded to its master's whistle. Time to start, thought he, but was at a loss how to dispose of the old man. He was so uncommunicative, so secretive, as if backed by some force of which he was the guardian. Kyrill sensed an indefinable danger to himself in the old man. Before undertaking any other job, this nut would have to be cracked.

Kyrill raked the cinders, blew upon some birch bark until it flamed, and broke a few dead branches.

"Do you reckon to settle down here for good an' all?" the old man queried from the hut.

"No, I haven't time. I am going to warm your heels a bit so as to thaw your tongue."

The old man shrank into his corner. By the rasping sound he made, Kyrill guessed that the aged fellow was trying to tear off the straps.

"How do you find them?" asked Kyrill. "Do they make good straps in Kolomna?"

"Blast you . . . !"

"Perhaps you'll speak now?"

"There's time enough."

Kyrill hauled his companion to the fire and heated his legs slightly. The old man winced, but uttered no word. Kyrill grew thoughtful.

"If he's so secretive, there must be something behind it. He's apprehensive and suspicious of me. If so, he'll have to be tortured."

Baring the old man's back, he applied the lash. The man groaned but still held his tongue. For a long time Kyrill continued to torture him, flogging him and holding him close to the fire. The old man's heart grew perceptibly weaker and his tongue began to thaw.

"Oh, what is it you want of me?"

"Out with it. I'm listening."

"But what do I know?"

"What's your name?"

"Mikeisha."

"Well then, Grandpa Mikeisha, what are you herding here?"

"Have patience, grandson. When my men come home, they'll tell you."

Kyrill shoved the old man's heels so far into the embers that the skin shrivelled up at once. Grandfather wriggled and slipped from Kyrill's grasp.

"Hear me, then, damn you! May the earth turn to stone under your feet!"

Listen. When they return, they'll hold my burial feast on your bones. What a good laugh they'll have!"

His eyes narrowed and large tears clung to the corners under the beetling brows. Suddenly Kyrill was seized with compassion.

"All said and done, you'd better live. You gave me a fright."

Grandad raised his eyes and nodded towards a corner of the hut.

"Fetch the ointment you'll find over there. Smear some on."

Kyrill anointed the grey-blue decrepit body with the fragrant ointment, which was of a greenish hue. He carried the old man inside and laid him on the bear-skin, rubbed his swollen hands, and sat at his patient's feet.

The old man grew worse. He told Kyrill to find a bunch of roots and brew them before the fire went out. By the time Kyrill brought in the potion the man was tossing about in a fever. With parched lips he sipped the beverage, scalding himself, but apparently feeling soothed. Motioning the ladle aside, he looked at Kyrill without rancour.

"Well, as I told you, my name is Mikeisha. What more do you want to know?"

"Better rest awhile first."

"And what shall I call you?"

"Do you think you'll be calling me anything for long?"

"How can one have the heart to leave a sick old man alone?"

"Trying to keep me here till your jail-birds turn up, eh?"

"If you have any doubts, you'd better be off."

"How can you expect me to trust you when you bound me in my sleep?"

"No stranger would come to such an out-of-the-way place for any honest purpose. Were you one of us, you would have named yourself at once."

"What do you mean by 'out-of-the-way'? The hut is just by the roadside."

"Are you crazy?"

"It's possible that you yourself have got into the wrong hut, grandad."

"No, I'm in the right one. But what may you be looking for in these parts?"

"Nothing. I was merely riding by, and took shelter for the night so as to get some sleep."

"How far were you thinking of going?"

"To Ryazan."

"Oho! The road to Ryazan lies along the Oka, yet you have been pushing through the forest. Besides, nobody travels at night for a good purpose."

"I left the Oka when I skirted Perevitsk."

"An honest man does not avoid towns at night-time."

"Well, where am I?"

"Give me some more of that potion."

Kyrill obeyed and grandad sipped more of the brew out of the ladle.

"Ah, but you have bruised my heart sadly. On leaving Perevitsk you took the by-road to Pronsk, and then turned down the track leading to the 'forest pastor'."

"When first I saw you I thought you were someone far more terrible than that."

"My feet are burning. Can you feel how bad they are? Were you ever put through the ordeal by fire?"

"Grandad, it's not my feet but my heart which is stretched on hot embers."

"I have felt that, too."

"I must be going. I see that I'm in the wrong place."

"There's no need to hurry. You have nothing to fear."

"Wait a while. I'll see to my horse."

"No, stay."

"Forgive me, grandad."

"I'd have done the same to you. It was by my own hand that I prepared your undoing."

"But you didn't succeed."

"You are tending me, so it stands to reason that you are one of us."

"Thank you kindly."

"What peril are you escaping from?"

"My name is Kyrill."

Impulsively and hurriedly, as if afraid of being interrupted, he laid bare his whole life-story. He told the old man how he had become an orphan and had trekked to Constantinople with a merchant caravan which was attacked and plundered on the way. How he had suffered in the stony land of Greece. How he had learnt the stonemason's craft and Greek reading and writing in the stone monastery. He told of his life in the cloister.

"But Russia called me. Everywhere I tried to hear the Russian speech. A mission arrived from the Metropolitan. I made friends with the men of the bodyguard. They gradually got to know me, and when they went back to Russia they took me along with them. Ah, 'tis sweet to be among one's own people no matter how bitter life may be."

While he talked, the old man lay on his back with closed eyes. It seemed as though there was no breath left in him. His eyes were deeply sunken into their sockets. Kyrill clasped his cold hand.

"Grandad."

"What is it?" said the old man, startled.

"Feeling bad?"

"More easy now. Restful like. It's almost as though you were telling me my own life-story."

"How's that?"

"I escaped from the Tatars—you from the Greeks."

Kyrill related everything.

The old man laid his hand on Kyrill's head.

"I, too, slew a man. They meant to execute me. Now I'm old and weary. So I've settled down here, to give a helping hand to others in the same plight. But so far as you are concerned, your life henceforth is entirely on the road, like a bird's, flitting from bush to bush to evade the swoop of the hawk."

No one came during the day. The old man lamented:

"Where can they have got to?"

"Whom are you awaiting?"

"My lost jail-birds."

"Really, I think I'd best be on the move."

"Go out and see what game you can pick up, and it'll have to be cooked. I am too weak."

Towards evening three peasants peered out from behind the trees. The sight of Kyrill's horse had perplexed them. Besides, the old man was not to be seen, whereas Kyrill was bending over the fire. Though they tried to conceal themselves, Kyrill espied them.

"Come on, come on, we've long been expecting you," he cried, while cautiously drawing his hand across his stomach to make sure that the dagger was in its place.

One of the men, his bushy sheepskin cap pulled down over his forehead, slouched unwillingly forward and stopped silently in front of Kyrill.

"Why are you standing there like a sheep? Come nearer. Grandad is asleep."

"Oh no, I'm not," responded the old man. "I'm listening. You've been a long time coming."

"Haven't you come from Kolomna?"

"Yes."

"Thought so."

Kyrill scrutinized him keenly.

"My horse did not seem to recognize you."

"But I straightway passed the time of day with it. There it was as if it had been my very own."

"Well then, Schap, call the others. The meal is ready, but you'd better bring your own spoons."

Schap made a sign and his companions approached.

"Pray be seated," said Kyrill.

"You seem to have made yourself quite at home here."

"Like you with my horse."

"There's a sharp tongue for you!"

"Copied from your beard."

"Have you cooked the food with plenty of flavouring?"

"Ay, I've added herbs so as to eat your pies without hindrance."

"Well, let's taste it."

They ate in peace and silence. And Kyrill slept tranquilly among them.

"Remember the road," said the old "forest pastor" at dawn. Schap accompanied Kyrill to where the horse was tethered.

"Thank you, Kyrill."

"What for?"

"Both about the horse and the old man."

"Why for the horse?"

"That you did not peach on me. For what else?"

"And the old man?"

"Because you saved him."

"What did he tell you?"

"The way it all happened. He was mauled by Ryazanites; they tortured him to find out about us. Then you came along and chased them away and brought him to."

"Yes, that's how it happened. Grandad is right. Farewell, Schap."

When near his horse, Kyrill inquired:

"What about those pies you were to bake? Are they rich?"

"My only trouble is that there are too many eaters."

"That's why I was afraid of you. As to those Ryazanites, don't expect them back. Stay here in peace."

"One has but to look at you to know that anyone you punch will roll far away. See here!"

"What now?"

"Maybe there's something left of theirs. I'd go and fetch it."

"No, there's nothing."

Schap gave in.

"I do not need anything that belongs to you."

"Nor I of yours. Farewell!"

"Come back if need be."

"You may count on me."

To find an exit from the forest trails by day proved more difficult than by night to wander on to them. But towards noon Kyrill emerged from them and, steering his way by the tops of the trees rather than by marks on the ground, he reached the Ryazan gap.

Chapter XIX

MAMAI

THE STEPPE STRETCHED FAR AND WIDE.

Herd roamed the hillocks, and the soft fluting of the shepherds' pipes floated across the expanse like dust.

The cool breath of autumn came from the north, at times driving low grey clouds before it.

Caravans moved over the steppe : southward to the Caspian ; south-eastward to Bokhara ; eastward to China ; south-westward to the Genoese in Kaffa.

Camels gazed haughtily and indifferently at the world from the height of their uplifted heads. Their humps, distended with autumnal fat, stuck up proudly. The wind ruffled their brown manes. Their coats were thick with dust and bits of straw. Greenish saliva dribbled from their hairy mouths.

Day was drawing to an end. It was the hour when every shadow is clearly defined and dense, when the earth appears to be convex and distinctly outlined, slightly golden in hue.

The steppe stretched far and wide round Sarai. But the town itself rested peacefully within the shade of its gardens.

Peacefully, too, meandered the streams among the trees, and the scarlet gowns of Tatar women flitted brightly among the verdure.

Mamai was spending these days in his suburban pleasure-garden.

From neighbouring orchards came bursts of song, or the muffled sound of a tambourine beating time to the melody. Ripe fruit, the gifts of a settled life, gladdened the eyes of the nomads who had exchanged the whip for the spade.

In the leafy shade beside a pool paved with blue stone a chessboard was laid out on a rug with an irregular design. Bernaba, a Genoese, was deliberating whether it would be to his advantage to use the king's right to make a knight's move. Once only in a game the king, if he had not already castled and found himself in an unprotected field, was privileged to make a knight's move and attack his opponent. However, if the king were faint-hearted and castled, he lost the right to make such a sortie. This move was part of the form of chess at first introduced to Sarai from Persia.

Bernaba was wondering : "Would it be better to withdraw behind my castle instead of taking risks, although I have just swept my opponent's bishop from the board ?"

His pale, narrow face, framed in the fuzz of his black beard, quivered slightly ; one eyelid twitched—a bad habit. His finger slid with deliberation along the board.

But the Tatar's gaze through the narrow slits of his eyes was resolute. The large, slanting nostrils of his small snub nose were aquiver. His fair beard

shook as he watched the Genoese. A smile flickered at the corner of his mouth. The Tatar was Mamai.

The great chessboard, painted by a Persian artist, gave out a tinkle of tiny bells which had been placed on the inside. Bernaba's king took shelter behind his castle.

Mamai sighed his relief, and promptly moved his knight to threaten his opponent's king.

Carved by a Chinese craftsman, the ivory warriors again stood still. Bernaba carefully considered each move. Mamai made his counter-moves with quick precision.

As he sat cross-legged, a gold-embroidered slipper slid from his foot, revealing a heel dyed a deep vermilion. Mamai, keeping a keen watch, waited the Genoese's next move.

The prince's robe of thick Samarkand silk clung closely to his boyish figure. His head was carefully shaved, but his beard was a disappointment to him, for it was fair and thin. Yet the beards of khans in Persian drawings were rounded and thick, their eyes spherical and their hands slender. Mamai's hands were not slender but stubby. They, like his heels, were red with henna. Another vexation was that he had not yet been made the chief khan as he wished.

True, he was commander of a large army and could at will dispose of other khans. But each khan endeavoured to dominate the commander-in-chief.

Sixteen years had passed since the assassination of Khydyr. That had been a success, but nevertheless Mamai had not been made khan. He had installed Abdulla, but felt it necessary to slit this man's throat too. Finally he set up Mahomet-sultan, who, in his turn, had to be throttled.

Though Mamai held power firmly in his hands, the title of khan eluded his grasp. It was impossible to eliminate every one of those who held priority rights to the khanship. A campaign mounted on a big scale was essential, bringing fresh glory and leading to fresh acts of daring.

Bernaba sat mumbling poetry to himself. The two players spoke Persian to one another, though Mamai was not proficient in the language. He did not always understand the meaning of the verses, but concealed the contempt he felt for the Genoese when the latter expressed admiration for certain poets.

"The words are well put together, but their sense is obscure."

Bernaba would hold his tongue, but his face would flush and his eyes become narrow slits. At such times he would hide their expression from Mamai.

Mamai made no effort to like poetry. But to be fond of poetry was part of Bernaba's duty—just as it was the duty of the Arab slave Abdul-Rauf to groom Mamai's horse, or the slave Klim to cook Mamai's food. If there was a servant to love poetry, there was no need for Mamai to like it. Thus thought Mamai.

How many days must elapse before another batch of slaves was due to arrive? Begich would bring him his share of them. A large share.

The afternoon was drifting towards dusk. From the distance came the tap of tambourines mingled with the sound of singing. A caravan was passing. The camels screamed like frightened girls and the bells on their harness jingled harshly.

The scent of flowers became more cloying. They had been brought from Turan, just as three years earlier Bernaba had been brought from Kaffa, and rugs from Persia, or sweetly flavoured melons from Shemakha. The pool had been inlaid by a skilful stonecutter from Bokhara. The garden had been laid out by experienced slaves from Merv. Soon Begich would bring blue-eyed captive girls from Moscow.

Bernaba made an ill-judged move in the game.

"Check!" exclaimed Mamai.

Bernaba retreated.

"Check," said Mamai, attacking again.

Bernaba retreated once more.

"Mate!" Mamai thumped down his queen with such force that for some time the bells continued to tinkle within the chessboard.

The wicket gate flew open, and dusty, bedraggled soldiers tumbled into the garden.

More and yet more indistinct grew the sound of tambourines, and the songs ceased to be heard in the gardens.

The soldiers stood stockstill, their eyes glued to the ground. Not in this wise was a victory announced.

"It cannot be," muttered Mamai.

One of the bedraggled soldiers raised his dust-drenched face. This was Tash-bek, the great-grandson of Ghenghis!

"It cannot be," repeated Mamai.

"Begich is killed."

"And the army?"

Tash-bek bit his lip.

"Well?"

"I have to report that all are slain."

"Who could slay them all?"

Tash-bek held his peace.

Mamai fell upon the other two.

"Well?"

He seized them by their tattered robes. None could suspect the hidden strength in those delicate hands. The warriors nearly lost their balance.

Mamai again accosted Tash-bek.

"Speak!"

Briefly and sternly, Tash-bek told them all.

Mamai seemed to shrink, and his robe became so wide as to slip from his shoulders. The commander of legions kicked the chessboard where it lay on the rug. The bells tinkled and then were silent. The board split in twain under Mamai's ruthless heel.

Bernaba watched this savage dance with wintry calm.

Mamai, limping slightly, ran up to where Tash-bek stood and, raising his arm, was about to strike him in the face, when the warrior caught the prince's hands and held them in his own with a vicelike grip.

"Hold!"

"Let me go."

"But . . ."

As abruptly as his rage had risen, so it quietened down.

"Tell me once more."

Tash-bek wiped his face on his sleeve. He moved towards the dish on which lay a sliced melon and, pushing the slices aside, lifted the dish and drank the juice. The dish shook in his hands as he gulped the liquid down.

Mamai waited submissively behind him.

When Tash-bek turned round, he noticed for the first time that Mamai was small of stature, lop-sided, spindle-shanked. Only the hands were strong and the eyes quick, fierce, and full of guile.

"A polecat," thought he, though he was careful not to say so aloud. He

merely repeated the story of how they had marched, crossed the Vozha, and fought.

"Khazi-bey, Begich, Kaverga, Karagaluk, Kastruk—all are killed."

Mamai said:

"I see that you are a better judge of horseflesh than any of them. You managed to gallop away."

"You should have been there yourself."

"I shall be."

"You?"

"Ere the leaves in this garden turn yellow I shall burn Moscow, and Dmitri will be collecting cow-dung for my fire."

"So thought Begich."

"Begich is not—me. And you, did you not think so likewise?"

"What about yourself?"

"Answer!"

"While I was with you here, I thought so."

"Will you go forth again, with me this time?"

"I shall not refuse."

"You will not be asked."

Mamai made a sign to Bernaba.

"Go, call the Council. Quick!"

Bernaba went to do his bidding.

"You will tell them," said Mamai, "why you have forgotten how to fight." Again he flew into a rage.

"Why did this have to happen? Could you not trample them underfoot? Couldn't you mow them down? Were there not enough of you? Had you forgotten how to use your sword, or how to sit your horse, eh?"

Tash-bek swerved round and shouted to one of his men:

"Order that water be brought."

Mamai felt bewildered. Had they ceased to fear him? He would muster fresh forces without delay, would lead them into battle. . . .

Mamai's nostrils distended and closed like the mouth of a fish out of water.

Meanwhile, the leaders of the Horde army were assembling in the garden. Many were missing, for they lay dead on the banks of the Vozha. Those who were alive, who had been leading sedentary lives in Sarai, could never replace them. None were the equals of Begich or Kastruk or Khazi-bey. Therefore he, Mamai, would have to step into those lost ones' shoes.

The murzas and army leaders of the Horde, abashed by the unexpected summons, were entering Mamai's house.

This famous and dazzling house had always acted as a lodestone to them, though few had crossed its threshold. Mamai had his favourites who accompanied him on his campaigns, sharing his mutton and his kumiss.

The unloved, the hated, the ungifted had been summoned this day, because the favourites had fallen on the shores of the Vozha.

Above them sparkled the ceiling, lavishly painted with arabesques and flowers. Beneath their feet lay the silent carpets, thick as camels' hides. The alabaster walls, like delicately patterned lace, reminded one of spindrift. Many of those present had looked upon the sea, but few had ever seen Mamai's apartments.

That Mamai was not his usual self was obvious to everyone. The news of the rout had already reached them. But only here and now did these men come fully to realize the extent of the disaster.

They sat in the cool shade of the room, their dusty legs crossed, endeavouring to preserve their dignity, while at the same time not incurring Mamai's displeasure.

Mamai guessed truly enough that some of them were jubilant. There were those who thought: "Now Mamai's friends have fallen, Mamai himself will fall."

They and Mamai sat together in silence. Yet he had not bidden them to a silent meeting. He said to Tash-bek:

"The Council is gathered here to listen to what you have to tell."

Many of them thought: "He is crafty. He wishes it to appear as if we had come of our own accord and not at his behest."

Tash-bek advanced unwillingly.

"What can I say? We fought in such a wise that the survivors feel ashamed. The living envy the dead. I envy them, too. The Russ have beaten us. Out of every three fighting men, only one returned alive. Out of three that returned alive there is but one that is sound. Out of three fit men, one alone would care to march against the Russ again. You yourselves can reckon how many warriors are available. I have nothing more to say."

Mamai:

"You speak like a slave and a coward. And I had thought you a prince."

"No, I am not a coward. I will march against Moscow again."

Mamai:

"If one sword does not yield three in exchange; if, having lost one horse, a soldier does not bring back three, there is no sense in keeping an army. We slaughter and shall continue to slaughter mares who provide neither foals nor milk. We conquered in order to obtain the increase of the vanquished for ourselves. Not exorbitant, merely a tithe of everything for us. That is the rule of the Horde. That will continue to stand. We must march again! Speak! How soon can you make ready for a campaign and how will you march? Russia belongs to us and we shall remind her of our rights."

Tash-bek:

"Much has been conquered by the Horde. We need no fresh conquests. We must take from those already vanquished. That is what Ghenghis did. We forgo tribute in some cases and impose it with blood and privations in others. Wars impoverish us. But wars are only worth waging if they bring in booty."

Mamai:

"Precisely my own opinion. If tribute is not forthcoming, it must be obtained by force."

One of the murzas said reprovingly:

"It was unwise of you to yield to Dmitri. First you lower the tribute, then you exhort us to attack him in order to raise the old tribute."

Another voice impinged on the debate, that of old Barlas:

"Since you remitted the tribute, it is for you to collect it."

Mamai:

"What?"

When they had quietened down, Mamai raised himself from his seat on the floor.

"These are my orders. Muster all who return from Begich's campaign. You yourselves must rally here tomorrow. Has anyone a desire to speak?"

The Council sat in silence.

Mamai:

"Then we may take the matter as settled."

They sprang to their feet, eager to be gone.

He offered them neither kumiss nor conversation, but gazed after them with hatred.

When they had gone, Bernaba came up to him.

"They are not to be trusted, khan. You will have to seek other leaders."

"Warriors are not camels' dung strewn about the steppes."

"I have a plan . . ."

"There's no time, no time to waste. We shall have to act now. While Dmitri is revelling in his triumph we must creep upon him before he can recover."

Again he leapt to his feet, his face pale as he stamped on the floor.

"Burn them! Slit their throats! Smash them!"

Soon he calmed down.

"We have barely time to place foot in stirrup and whip up our horses. No more."

Bernaba said nothing.

"Are you doing as I bade you? Learning Russian?"

"Every day."

"Can you speak it?"

"A little."

"Can you pass yourself off as a Russian, as it was agreed between us?"

"Too soon for that yet."

"Make haste, then."

Bernaba drew nearer and whispered into Mamai's ear:

"Take no risks. The khan will rejoice at your defeat."

"Here is a man," thought Mamai, "who wishes me to acquire fame and power. He advises, helps, and supports me. Were I to fall, Bernaba would fall likewise, and therewith all his Genoese hopes. Who among the Tatars would find a use for this Genoese—albeit a Tatarized one? Who among the Genoese would accept this Tatarized loafer, even though he be a Genoese?"

This cunning swindler had done good service to Mamai. He had travelled in many lands. His horizon was wide and the sky above him lofty.

Bernaba's counsels were ruthless, mean, and grasping. But they fitted Mamai's personal ambitions. This adventurer was closer to him than any of his friends.

Mamai:

"Dmitri will not have much opportunity to rejoice. I shall win to victory."

Bernaba slunk away in silence. A slave was sweeping rubbish from the carpets. This slave's ear had been cut off and he kept his red hair long so as to cover the disfigurement. The slave's name was Klim. He was the son of a Ryazan woman by a passing soldier.

"If a red-haired, fair-complexioned man is born on Ryazan soil, it means that his parents are aliens. Wheresoever they may hail from, Ryazan nicknames them red-heads," Klim had once told Bernaba in reply to the latter's question: "Who are you, Red-poll?"

Klim had not seen his native land for thirty years. He spoke bad Russian. Mamai had noticed that whenever some khan or other was murdered in the Horde, the slave glanced approvingly at Mamai. Mamai, therefore, attached this slave closer to his person. He had confided to him the care of the rooms and the supervision of the food. He had also allowed Klim to visit the Russian church.

Bernaba retired. The slave, too, went away. Mamai went down into the garden.

It would be intolerable to think about the Vozha now that a fresh campaign was in the making. The wound inflicted by the Vozha was overshadowed by the pinions of hope.

The night was calm. There came no sound of singing or beating of drums. Here and there the clay walls flickered to a rosy hue in the light of bonfires. A lonely star, red as a drop of blood, hung in the dark autumnal sky. Water gurgled loudly in the stream. The air was laden with the smell of steppe herbage—mint and wormwood. With this was mingled the alien scent of garden flowers. It was like a strange design traced on the surface of a rug but failing to merge into the fabric.

Mamai no longer thought about defeat. He was filled with the hopes of a successful campaign. He was hard put to it to restrain his impatience to be on the march.

Meanwhile, Bernaba was lying on the floor with a lighted candle by his side, diligently conning Russian words and trying to learn them by rote.

"*Komon, komon, komon . . .*"

Then again aloud :

"*Komon*—that means a horse."

Another word :

"*Kmet, kmet, kmet . . .*"

And he repeated aloud :

"*Kmet*—a warrior."

Again :

"*Mechk, mechk, mechk . . .* Now then, Brother Bernaba, say unto me what means '*mechk*'. The word '*mechk*' means 'bear'. O thou Genoese, beloved Frank, thou art indeed wise and truly learned."

Thus did Bernaba endeavour to surmount the difficulties of the Russian tongue.

At length, banishing "*mechk*", "*komon*" and "*kmet*" from his mind, he lay supine, gazing up at the low ceiling, which was made of small rafters, and began to recall Omar. Persian had come easier to him. Bernaba was a youth of eighteen when his father died in Kazvin. At the age of twenty-two Bernaba, who had been imprisoned for his father's debts, was ransomed by some merchants and taken to Kaffa on the Black Sea. But they would not let him go. When he was twenty-seven, he visited Constantinople and at thirty found himself in Sarai as Mamai's slave. He went there with a trading caravan, ran into debt, and his partners, refusing to remit this unsuccessful trader what he owed, sold him into slavery as though he were an ass.

How well Omar expressed himself !

"'All will be turned into clay.' How is that in verse? And further on : 'The potter will take a handful of this clay and mould it into a bowl for wine, out of the skulls of kings and the feet of slaves. Hasten not, brother, hasten not. Thy feet will carry thee out of bondage. But 'twill be better still if with thee they carry out something else besides.'"

He sprang to his feet in alarm. But the noise which had startled him was merely the candle, which had spluttered and fallen.

Chapter XX

RYAZAN

KYRILL KNEW THAT THE LAND OF RYAZAN HAD PASSED THROUGH MUCH FIRE AND blood. It had been the first in Russia to receive the blows of the Tatars. In earlier times, too, not a few deaths and groans had been smothered in its tall, wild grasses. This was the seventh year since Ryazan had been completely burned out and razed to the ground.

Kyrill was amazed. For there stood the town with tall neat houses of oak. It was not spread out but compact, seeming like a clenched fist ready to give blow for blow. A town rising proudly above the pellucid waters of the broad river Oka. High above, clouds drifted in the deep blue sky, and young trees raised their golden-hued wings as though preparing to soar up into the heavens.

The upper parts of the grey walls were sparingly coloured in red. The hems of the men's tunics were embroidered. Strangers they shunned, differing greatly from the Muscovites in this respect. Mistrustful, too, were they, having suffered much ill-usage at the hands of alien peoples.

Kyrill, who was curious concerning new towns and customs, took in everything. Here the bast shoes were plaited differently, the bast being narrow and the plaiting fine. Linen, also, was different. A dark-blue thread was woven into it, giving the material a striped appearance. The peasants' trousers were made of it. The Ryazan folk had brown, chestnut-coloured hair. Young horse-chestnut trees grew in the town. The people loved to plant out gardens and to grow flowers. Even the carts in the market-place were unlike those one saw in Moscow. They were more rounded in shape and were swifter when on the move.

Kyrill sauntered through the suburbs, questioning people and making friendly overtures to them. But they, hearing his unfamiliar accent, answered gruffly and unceremoniously. The girls, however, with their twinkling brown eyes, giggled amiably, singing softly and mockingly as he passed :

"In Ryazan, in our own town,
All the mushrooms they have eyes.
While they're being swallowed down
They—look on . . ."

Kyrill glanced over his shoulder and shook his head. The maids, abashed, took to their heels.

At the Pronski gate he met a transport of victuals moving slowly into the city. These were stocks of food brought to the boyars from their demesnes. The wheels sank deep into the ruts. The scraggy horses, tugging on their harness, could barely haul the loads up the hill.

"Poor brutes !" thought Kyrill. "Men's languages and customs differ, but toil and suffering are everyone's lot."

One of the peasants struggled long with his horse. A wheel had become warped. The wooden rim had broken and the cart was stuck in a deep rut. Enraged, the peasant thrashed the beast on the hind quarters until his whip of fine bast fibre was torn to shreds. The animal's coat was moist and red with blood, yet still the peasant continued to belay it, forcing it to strain beyond its strength.

"Stop that!" shouted Kyrill severely.

The peasant stayed his hand.

"How would you like to be thrashed in such wise?"

A crowd quickly gathered around them.

"Ugh, you!" retorted the peasant. "I am Ryazan born and bred. You come from Moscow and presume to teach me!"

Kyrill sensed the crowd's resentful silence.

"No Muscovite shall set himself up to rule in Ryazan."

"And let's suppose you have none of your folk to rule?"

"Just listen to him!"

"There's nothing worth listening to. One can judge that by the condition of your horse."

"It's my own horse. I can kill it at once if I feel so disposed. I've a right to. . . ."

"You fool!" answered Kyrill.

The words were hardly out of his mouth before the crowd's silence changed into a roar.

"Teaching us!"

"Moscow has come to put us to shame."

"We'll give him short shrift!"

Kyrill turned about with a smile, exclaiming:

"Fools!"

But he granted them no time for repartee. His voice on an instant became hard as steel:

"What are your wages for an hour's work? I ask you. Well?"

Somebody shouted hesitatingly:

"What's the price of a horse?"

The same steely voice replied. The others listened in troubled silence.

"There you are! It follows that the man's a fool. His horse is worth one hundred and twenty times more than an hour's labour. The cart can be unloaded, taken up the hill, and reloaded within an hour, can't it?"

No answer was forthcoming.

"It can be done. Therefore, I ask you, should a horse be killed or a waggon unloaded?"

"It's my horse," repeated the peasant, waxing furious.

Driven frantic by the crowd's attention, he thereupon rushed at the animal, brandishing a log. He was about to give it a clout on the jaw, when his arm slipped, and the horse's large and humid eyes blinked at him, fear making the long lashes quiver.

"There you are, fool!"

"It's none of your business," one of the crowd shouted at Kyrill.

"But that's just it. It is my business. I'm not going to stand by and watch the horse beaten."

"Just try."

The carters rallied round their comrade, and began rolling up their sleeves.

Blood rushed to Kyrill's head. He made for the road, struck out at two peasants who barred his way, wrenched the log from the man's hand, seized him by the hair, and gave him such a twist that he was hurled sprawling to the ground, uttering a howl. Before any had time to recover from the surprise of the onslaught, Kyrill, his voice raised in anger, asked:

"A horse goes into battle, doesn't it? Ryazan needs horses. Who can fight without a horse?"

The question caused astonishment. But Kyrill quickly replied to it himself, thus clinching the argument :

"No army can exist without a horse, and a fool is invariably an enemy. . . . Well, who's for a horse and who's for a fool?"

The people laughed.

"That's why I intervened. Now then, come on, you chaps!"

Ere any had time to help him, Kyrill put his stalwart shoulder to the back of the cart, called to the horse, gave a heave, and with creaks and groans the vehicle was lifted out of the rut.

The peasant was nonplussed. He knew not whether to swear or to thank Kyrill for his assistance. But Kyrill, with a shrug, was already on his way through the crowd. It yielded him passage in friendly humour, and the tables were turned in his favour. The people were no longer angry but pleased.

"Did you hear? He praised Oleg's army."

"Perchance he is not a Muscovite after all."

"Maybe he's Ovdotia's nephew from Novgorod? It's been rumoured that he has been found."

"Nay. I have seen him before. He's a trader in skins at Nizhni. That's where he hails from."

"You braggart, you! He's one of us, a Ryazanite, a wax-refiner from Pronsk."

Kyrill walked about Ryazan.

Thick wall by thick wall stood the oaken houses of the city. Within the palisade rose Prince Oleg's mansion. The market-place was thronged. In the smiths' alley horses were being shod, swords tempered. Kyrill stopped to view the scene.

"Come and take a closer look," the smith invited him, pleased at the interest taken in his craft.

Kyrill ran his finger along the blade of a freshly forged sword.

"Never saw one like this before. Isn't it a trifle on the heavy side?"

"It will serve the longer."

"They've ceased forging this kind in Moscow."

"There's no keeping pace with Moscow. We're told that the Muscovites used Swedish swords from overseas in the battle of the Vozha."

"Could you not forge similar ones?"

"Well, you see, Moscow makes them. They say that an alloy of their own is added so that better ones are turned out. But we are not permitted to make any. Oleg has decreed that it's not for him to be Moscow's pupil. Let her learn from us first."

"Oleg was given a lesson when he was chased out of Ryazan."

"You must not mention that. He'll chop your head off."

"All right. May God help you!"

"Thank you kindly for that good wish."

Kyrill examined the cloth which came from the Ryazan looms. Not inferior to those of Constantinople. Darker indeed, but free from blemishes and finely woven.

He saw many handicrafts being carried on in the market-place—coopering, hardware-making, copper-smithing, sheepskin-dressing. The wares attracted Kyrill by their excellent quality and honest workmanship. They were not ostentatious, but modest, and pleasing rather by substance than by glitter.

A profound belief in this industrious, steadfast people swept over Kyrill in a wave of happiness. Gifted, quiet, reserved—so unlike the Greeks, who pro-

duced things worth a copper yet made such a to-do that one might have imagined their wares were worth a ruble. These folk would create a ruble's worth and leave you to judge. They did not boost their goods.

"You delight me, Ryazan city!"

By this time Kyrill was leaving the market-place and making his way along the Libied. The sun was setting behind Skomoresenskaya Hill. A tall grey-beard called to him:

"Hello, son, do you want to buy a horse?"

"Nay!" Kyrill smiled back at him. "I'm selling mine."

"How much?" urged the old man.

"Have you ever seen my horse?"

"I'm old, son, and I know that such a strapping fellow as you must have a fine horse."

"What makes you think that?"

"Fine fellow—fine horse! On the battlefield there are many kinds of horses. It's not for the likes of you to ride a spavined jade."

Kyrill reflected: "All said and done, what do I care? I'll sell the beast, now that I have reached Ryazan."

He motioned the old man to follow him. It was only after tucking the purchase money into his belt that Kyrill felt surprise.

"It seems that I've actually sold my horse! In that case, I've arrived in good earnest, I reckon."

Though the day was on the wane, Kyrill still went about questioning all and sundry.

"Whereabouts in the suburb do the market-gardeners live?"

He was shown the way.

"D'ye know if there is one called Gordenia?"

"The man who grows white-heart cabbages?"

"That's my man."

"There's one like him. Second house from the farther end."

"Thanks."

Next day Kyrill began his search for Gordenia. Shoving his Kolomna flask into his wallet, he greased his boots and, marvelling at the shyness which beset him, went off to the market-gardeners' quarter.

It was a pleasant place, low-lying, near to the river. The Libied flowed tranquilly, while the broad-leaved water-lilies rested on its surface. The air was fresh, smelling of earth and vegetables. Rows of beds stretched behind the fences. The foliage of carrots billowed like green feathery drifts. Beets displayed their purple, thick-veined, shining leaves. Kyrill was surprised at what he took to be empty beds; onions were ripening there with their golden skins, and silvery garlic; the stalks long since withered produced the effect of empty beds. Lastly he saw a field in which grew huge blue-headed cabbages leaning this way and that. Large water-butts stood about between the rows.

Kyrill entered the garden. He was met by a swarthy, dark-eyed man. There was something about his forehead, the bridge of his nose, the shape of his ears, which in a vague way reminded him of Aniuta.

"Is your name Gordenia?"

"Is it cabbages you are after? Better wait a week or so."

"Cabbages can wait. It's Aniuta I want to see. I've been told she lives here."

"She does."

"Would you mind asking her to come along?"

"What for?"

"I'm from Kolomna. I've a message for her about her cottage there."

"You can tell me. She's my sister."

"I must tell it to her own self. Where is she?"

"She'll be back by evening."

"All right, I'll call again."

"Tell me and I'll give her the message."

"No. I shall tell it to her myself."

"Bad news?"

"Nothing bad. But they asked me to speak to her. There's a woman living at her cottage."

"A lodger?"

"Well, no. A neighbour. Somebody asked this neighbour about her. You know what women are; she was very insistent. 'Tell her, tell her yourself,' says she."

"That devil of hers hasn't turned up again, has he?"

"Maybe he has. I don't know."

"What's his game? He is a monk, isn't he?"

"He's unfrocked now. Wants to earn his living."

"That's the man, to be sure."

"I really do not know who it could have been."

"But you said he was an unfrocked monk."

"Oh, I said that without thinking. I know him. But whether it was he who came I have not the faintest idea."

"You have come to tell her something and yet you don't seem to know what it is. I can't make you out at all."

Kyrril thought he had got himself into a fine pickle. After a moment's silence Gordenia came to a decision.

"Better not come back. Might upset her. She pined for two years and is just getting over it. Now you'll stir the whole thing up again. Yes, better not come. You can tell them in Kolomna that you could not find her, that she isn't here. Come along and have a look at my cabbages."

"Won't she be back?"

"Possibly she'll not be home today. A gossip of hers is ill and has asked her to go and mind the house. Something might keep her till tomorrow maybe. There now, look at that. A fine lot, aren't they?"

The white-heart cabbages lay enfolded in their bluish leaves as in silver bowls. Their yellow-tinted globes, smooth as though smeared with oil, were hard as a bone and glistened in the autumn sunshine.

"How did you manage to raise such a fine crop?"

"Ah, that's my secret! Cabbage thrives on warmth, and drinks like a horse. So I give it water with the chill off, not from the river but out of the water in the butts. You see, that water gets warmed up during the day and it is fit for drinking by the evening. That's why they grow like that. There's many here would fain imitate me, but they can't believe that I make them grow by my watering. They just don't believe me. 'There's more to it than that,' they say. And so theirs don't grow like mine. One must love one's job if one is to understand it. Now for a look at my carrots. Have you ever seen the like?"

Kyrril was elated at the thought that he was treading the earth which Aniuta's feet had touched the self-same morning. Were not those her narrow footprints which he discerned on the damp soil?

"Have you many to lend you a hand?"

"Where should I get them from? This isn't Moscow. We don't go to wars or take prisoners. Who can find hands? But if we did have them . . . A pair of horses is cheaper to buy than one captive."

"But Ryazan does fight."

"Maybe. But have you ever heard that we take prisoners? Either we ourselves go into captivity or we exchange prisoners for our own men. We are not Moscow, brother. Our Oleg carries his head high, and business is at a standstill."

"You're placed so, kind of betwixt and between."

"Ay. But 'twould be better to take one side or the other."

"Suppose Oleg were to take the Tatar side?"

"Then I'd go to Kolomna."

"Kolomna can't accommodate all the people."

"I'm not talking about the people. You must look after yourself."

"But the people, doesn't that mean you?"

"What are you getting at?"

"And aren't you the people? Can a man get along without the people?"

"Oh, a man can talk with you only on a full stomach. I've not had my supper yet."

The impression grew on Kyrill that something had offended Gordenia. He made up his mind to be off.

"All the same, you'd best tell Aniuta that a man came from Kolomna and wished to have a word with her. Ask her to wait for me tomorrow."

"Very well then, I'll let her know. Only on one condition. There must be no talk of that other man between you. Understand?"

"Agreed; I shall not tell her anything about that other man. I want to talk to her about myself. I want to ask her if I may live in her cottage."

"You'd better talk the matter over with me. I would tell you at once."

"Just tell her a man came from Kolomna and asked her to wait for him. He's got to speak to her himself."

"You're a queer fish. All right, come tomorrow."

Kyrill took his departure. One more night without her, only one! But will it not seem longer than the whole of the last two years? Not harder than the way he had trodden during those two years. It had already begun while the pale autumn sun was still shining, and it would end only when the sun rose again.

Chapter XXI

MAMAI'S INTERVIEW WITH THE KHAN

MAMAI WAS RIDING PAST THE KHAN'S GARDEN.

His scarlet coat shimmered over the green saddle. His yellow boots pressed the silvery flanks of his mount, while barely touching the gilt stirrups.

The garden was a large one and surrounded by a whitewashed wall. From the eminence of his horse's back he cast a furtive glance into the interior. The garden lay like a cistern, full of depths and blue shadows. Branches, already bereft of fruit, swayed in the breeze, and the noise of the leaves drowned the plaintive song of the women. Away in the distance, like goldfish in deep water,

the khan's wives roamed and sang. They were unaware that Mamai, whom everyone feared, was riding along the path on the other side of the wall.

Over there among the shadows one of the khan's wives was strolling. Her eyebrows were arched like a swift's outstretched wings. Once, rising in his stirrup and looking into the garden, Mamai had caught a full view of her face. Today he did not rise, for behind him rode the leaders of his troops. He was on his way to an interview with the khan to discuss Russian affairs and the campaign. He wanted the men to note his indifference to the khan's treasures. Nevertheless he glanced sideways over those arrogant walls, and his ears caught the rustling of feminine garments and the vague sadness of the song.

Soldiers ran to the gates to take Mamai's horse by the bridle, but he swerved it sharply towards the gates, which the guards, abashed, flung wide. Without bending his head, Mamai rode into the courtyard, and in like manner his retinue followed.

It behoved Mamai to enter the khan's dwelling with due humility, humbly to explain Begich's ignominy. But Mamai came as a conqueror, halting his steed amid the fountains and flowers. To the captain of the khan's bodyguard he said :

"Announce my arrival."

He advanced towards the house as if it were his own.

The khan rejoiced over the news of the Vozha. This khan had been installed by Mamai. He was under the obligation to bear the fact in mind, and therefore detested Mamai. The khan reflected : "This haughty fellow will be humiliated by the rout on the Vozha. The loss of the army means a loss of Mamai's power. Such shame will degrade and weaken Mamai, thereby raising and strengthening my own power."

The khan was seated beneath the tall, sculptured pillars of a garden terrace. High overhead, among the flowery patterns of the ceiling, swallows had built their nests. They twittered as they prepared for their autumn flight. The khan had a soft spot in his heart for birds. He sat cross-legged, his silver-shod feet tucked under his coat of cloth-of-gold. From beneath his brows his slanting eyes watched Mamai's arrogant progress towards him accompanied by the guards. The khan's round, transparent, mouse-like ears stuck out. A rose-coloured flat cap, set well down on his head, covered the round forehead.

After an exchange of greetings Mamai lowered himself on to the carpet and sat waiting in silence.

"We are aware of the calamity which has befallen us," said the khan. "We need peace. Peace will give us strength."

Mamai stared in front of him, thinking : "There sits the khan rejoicing. The Horde, like a captive panther, hates me, while submitting to me so long as my hand wields the sword. Now they fancy that the sword has fallen from my grasp, since the army is that sword and the army is beaten. But has the sword fallen?"

"No, khan."

"How's that?"

"We have a new army."

With a troubled look the khan surveyed the leaders' grouped round Mamai. He knew each one of them. Many sided with the khan ; Mamai's champions had forfeited their lives on the Vozha, but all of those who stood here showed their timidity by their downcast eyes. Only Mamai's cur, the Genoese, standing behind the others, rolled his round, owl-like eyes. That, too, was a part of Mamai's insolence, thus to appear before the khan with an attendant slave. "Can Mamai

be hinting that he is going north again just when the swallows are heading for some warmer clime?"

"There be those who aim at weakening the Horde. Do not lend them your ear."

Mamai did not know to whom the insinuation referred. He frowned. He was not seeking advice from the khan. He himself was well aware of what it was incumbent on him to do. He knew the course he had to take. Were it not that Begich's life had been cut short at the Vozha, had Moscow fallen, the khan, too, would have fallen, and Mamai himself would have assumed the khanship. Now that he had not the strength to overthrow the khan, the latter had become bolder, pronouncing judgment as if he really ruled Mamai. Again he voiced his design, already prepared to put it into execution.

"We must attack Moscow without delay. The campaign will bring us victory. Victory does not weaken the victor."

"The forces of the Horde are in your trust. But forces need to be handled intelligently. So be on your guard," said the khan.

Mamai mused: "Preaching! How pleased he would be were I to fall in with his wishes and call off the campaign, or if I start and am beaten! But I shall give him gall for honey." Aloud he said:

"I shall go forth and conquer Russia."

The khan treated Mamai to Turanian melons. The green pulp gave out an aroma of roses. The juice was refreshing, and words wove themselves into a caressing drawl as if saturated with the thick melon juice. In the shade of the khan's garden such converse was befitting. Mamai talked as if he were fondling a child while all the time he had a whip concealed up his sleeve.

Flitting among the trees in the distance he caught sight of women's garments. The khan's wives would become Mamai's after the fellow's throat had been slit with a knife. At least, those of the wives he wanted. But before seizing any of the khan's other treasures Mamai would place his hand over those eyebrows which curved like a swift's wings.

Cautiously glancing at Pulad-Bugair, to whose care he intended to entrust the khan's throat, he scrutinized the man to make sure whether he still enjoyed the khan's confidence. Bugair sat on the khan's left, carefully holding the towel on which the magnate wiped his sticky fingers after eating the melon. But before giving the hint to Bugair, Mamai felt that he must arise and conquer.

He got to his feet and, bowing and smiling, he thanked the khan for regaling him.

The wind billowed out his coat. A fine drizzle cooled his face. The horse's back was wet. The soldiers withdrew a damp cloth from the saddle. Slowly Mamai placed his foot in the stirrup and, without turning to look back, rode forth to meet the wind.

It blew from the north, from Moscow. It brought with it autumn and cold. It lashed those who rode against it. Mamai, bending his prominent brow, which lacked any sign of kindness, whipped up his mount. There was need for haste.

His own house was not inferior in appearance to the khan's. Master builders from Khorezem had carved the tall pillars, had painted and enamelled the walls facing the garden. Mamai walked along the hard Turkoman carpets as if he were treading upon coagulated blood. Bernaba followed him.

Klim proffered him a loose, warm robe, pulled off his tight boots, replaced them by red slippers, and took up his station beside the wall.

Without turning his head, Mamai asked Bernaba:

"Will you come with me?"

"You go too fast for me."

"You lack confidence in me?"

"Enrol good fighting men. If there are none to be found just now, wait. Do not depend on remnants."

"Time is short. Everything is ready. Our warriors are eager."

Bernaba's eyes travelled to the garden. Dusk had set in early. Outside, the boughs swayed in the wind and rain lashed the leaves. Were he to remain behind, Mamai might forget all about him. Yes, he might be victorious and forgetful. This would be unbearable. It would mean the end. What could he do, alone in the alien Horde? Yet if he decided to go, and Mamai perished, what would befall him amid the Russian forests?

"Are you learning Russian?" queried Mamai, as though he had been following Bernaba's train of thought.

"I am."

"That is as it should be."

"When do you propose to start?"

"I shall dispatch the advance-guard in the morning and we shall follow in the course of the day."

Mamai's glance fell upon Klim.

"You, too, will accompany us to teach Bernaba Russian as we go along."

"I'd like to perform my devotions first, master."

"I do not forbid that."

"Thank you, master."

During long years of service Mamai had grown used to this slave. He had always smiled approvingly when Mamai assassinated khans, when he provoked the khans' relatives to fight like curs against one another. Klim invariably sided with Mamai. For three decades Klim had been in bondage. His native tongue was slipping from his memory. He was jubilant over Mamai's successes and mourned the misfortunes of the Horde. Now, during the days of preparation, he overhauled his master's weapons and armour and clothes, and collected provisions for the campaign.

"I've had a look at the arms and supplies for the campaign, master. All is in order. I sent the top of your coat-of-mail to be reforged and it's come back finely wrought."

"Go!"

Klim went out, took a horse, and cantered away from the gardens.

Nomad tents dotted the landscape all round the town. Their ranks filled the spaces between the gardens and the desolate wastes far beyond the walls. They belonged to the newcomers from outlying steppe regions. A smell of sour milk, cattle, and smoke filled the air. Klim observed that the number of tents was increasing. Many of them were hoisted on broad-beamed carts in readiness for a long trek. The skeleton framework of others was being diligently covered with wide felt by women. Here and there, crouched over cauldrons, they were cooking food. From some of the tents smoke filtered through an aperture in the apex. Their occupants had kindled the fire within so as to be sheltered from the rain, winter fashion. The nearer Klim drew to the town the more dense were the crowds. Never had he seen so many people passing through the gates. But he pressed his heels into the horse's sides and forced a passage for himself with the animal's chest.

The Orthodox church stood not far from the market-place. It was no easy task to thread one's way through the town of Sarai. The streets of beaten clay

were thronged with people. Women loitered on the flat roofs. Dogs barked from their eminence. Drove of sheep blocked the traffic. Men on horseback rode along the streets, pedestrians hugged the walls. The huge wheels of the native tilt-carts jostled both pedestrians and sheep. Camels roared. The din of cattle, barking dogs, tambourines, and shouts, creaking wheels, neighing horses, the roll of drums, the blare of trumpets, the bellowing of camels filled the air.

The further Klim advanced, the denser grew the crowd and the tenser and more deafening was the excitement in Sarai. To make headway, it was not the horse which needed the lash but the crowd. Had Klim not been Mamai's slave, he would never have dared to ride a horse, far less use a whip. But to Mamai's slave everything was permissible.

The Russian houses with their clay walls clustered round the church. Their roofs, either flat like those of Tatar dwellings or rising in stone cupolas like the tops of nomad tents, differed little from Tatar structures. But into the narrow lanes between them, now quiet and deserted, there usually forgathered the Russ of the Horde—merchants, slaves, monks, and serving-men. Some came to pray. Others to assuage their nostalgia by talking in their native tongue. Many such were in the Horde.

The Horde wove tissues out of silk imported from China and Persia, tanned hides, treated Morocco leather and the softer Russian variety. They made dyes, forged swords, spun wool, and disposed of the goods north, south, and west. Russian merchants purchased these expensive products of the steppe in the Horde markets, loaded them on to camels for dispatch across the wilderness, or sent them by boat by way of the Volga to Russian towns. Trade could not exist without clerks, assistants, priests, and servants. Russians of all kinds and conditions crowded into Sarai. Klim pushed forward among them.

He made for the church. The God of Russia looked down upon him benevolently and attentively. An oil-lamp glimmered softly before the image of Dmitri Solunki. He was the patron saint of Prince Dmitri of Moscow.

Klim glanced up at the saint seated on his princely throne clasping a sword-hilt in his hand. A menacing eye looked wrathfully at the foe. The hand was cautiously withdrawing the sword from its scabbard. Moscow knew full well which name to choose for her prince! Klim crossed himself devoutly before the image.

His obeisance to Our Lord savoured rather less of respect. He bowed, watchful and expectant, till a broad-browed, aquiline-nosed priest entered and knelt down. Then Klim rose to his feet, and approaching the priest, asked that he might go to confession.

Together they went to a dark, secluded lectern. There they stood, the priest's palm, broad as a soldier's, resting on the penitent's head. Klim told of Mamai's plan and his intention to start the next day on his campaign against Russia.

Klim retraced his steps through the cluttered town, while a fleet-footed monk hastened on his way by narrow lanes to face the bleak north wind.

The monk's habit passed swiftly into the stuffy gloom of a lonely hovel among the gardens. Dusk had deepened and the day had melted into night. It must have been a keen-eyed man who led a horse from the yard in which the hovel stood and set off at a gallop in a direction where the sky still reflected the greenish mist of sunset.

When dawn broke, advance columns, with the blare of trumpets deadening the battle-cries, left the walls of Sarai. At noon Mamai threw himself in their wake.

He sat his horse looking ahead, as though his goal were not far off. He lashed the charger and then immediately drew rein with a firm hand. But he was powerless to bridle his thoughts. Outstripping him, outstripping his advance troops, flying faster than wind or rumour, like wolves, they hurtled across the Horde steppes, leapt like squirrels through Russian forests, soared like birds over rivers and fords, swifter and ever swifter, to strike full tilt against the stone battlements of Moscow.

Chapter XXII

A MESSENGER TO OLEG FROM THE HORDE

OLEG SAT HIS HORSE ASKEW, HIS LEFT SHOULDER THRUST FORWARD. A RED saddle-cloth embroidered in white covered the animal's flanks, the heavy fringe reaching to its knees. This cloth was of Tatar or Alanian workmanship. Oleg was on his way home from the monastery.

Let Dmitri have his Troitsa in the forest wilds beyond Moscow, his Troitsa so sombre and austere. Oleg had chosen a spot on the high bank of the limpid Solocha where giant pines towered above the sandy precipice, and oak woods resounded with the multifarious cries of the feathered folk assembling there before the autumn migration. The gentle, languid flow of the river, the soft murmur of the woodland, the trustful warbling of birds calling to one another—everything united in a hymn to life. And on that particular spot Oleg fancied erecting a monastic chapel and a small chalet for himself so as to have a place of retreat from his cares and perhaps some day to end his life in this abode surrounded by vast expanses of quietude and peace.

He was now returning from this favoured haunt. The grass, made crisp by the night frost, cracked and snapped under the dancing tread of the Prince's steed. A few pages selected from his retinue and two kinsmen accompanied him, for at this time of year, when harvesting was near an end, everybody dispersed to his estates to collect poll taxes and rents, and Oleg detained no man. On the Vozha the noise of battle had died down, the stormcloud had rolled past Ryazan, and a long period of peaceful and prosperous life might be expected.

The cold was such as to condense the breath and make it visible; white grass above black earth; sylvan gold, and the deep blue of the Asiatic sky ahead; autumn enveloping in azure and strength every human being wearied by the worries and toil of summer.

When the walls of Ryazan rose out of the plain Oleg straightened himself in the saddle and his followers tightened their bridle-reins. Oleg sat lightly. His steed, too, stepped lightly. Ryazan soil re-echoed to the mettlesome crunch of hoofs. The little cavalcade passed the market gardens where the heads of cabbages still sprouted from the beds. A young woman wearing a rowanberry necklace shaded her eyes with her hand to have a good look at the finely apparelled troop. But she immediately covered her face with a shawl and bowed low as Ryazan's great Prince went by. Only her rowanberry necklace dangled from beneath the shawl, and Oleg eyed it fixedly and with ardour in his gaze.

Head erect, he passed beneath the dark vault of the Duhovski gate and noted the hoarfrost clinging to the grey log walls in places where the sun did not

penetrate, and, beyond the arched gateway, the blue dome of the sky. The Prince flung a rapid glance over his shoulder to see whether his retainers had bowed their heads when riding through the gate. Heads should be bent not because the arch was low, but in homage. For to enter Oleg's city was a great honour.

The Prince veered his steed into the narrow streets. Passers-by huddled against the walls, saluted, marvelling at him and respecting him. But he stared in front of him at the frequent turnings, at the red cornices above the grey oak of the buildings, here and there at the carved pillars of porches on the hither side of fences, or at the scaly domes of churches and the gaily-painted upper storeys of the houses. Autumn-tinted leaves flamed from the other side of the walls, in acute contrast to the black boughs of the already stricken birches. Now and again a flock of crows would rise precipitately and fly off, cawing loudly and flapping their wings.

In concord had Oleg raised his city from the ashes. Scarcely five years had gone by, and already the oak-timbered walls of Ryazan had darkened. Those who had to rebuild did so without delay; there were no laggards. Only the suburbs still resounded with the blows of axes and the shouts of carpenters. But even there, everyone was in haste to finish the job before the cold weather set in. The city once more stood as though no misfortune had ever befallen it. Many an oak had been felled for Ryazan's sake. Oleg gave them to the city without stint. The oak-groves along the Trubezh and Oka rivers had thinned perceptibly. Now all the buildings in Ryazan were of oak.

"It is solid," mused Oleg. "Oak becomes stronger year by year."

His retainers, riding behind him, having thrown their riding-coats across their saddles, now paraded before hundreds of eyes which from every house, gate, nook and corner followed Oleg's progress.

As he rode into the courtyard of his mansion he was surprised to see the menials crowding round the porch. His quick eye instantly caught sight of a sweating, mud-begrimed horse, without a saddle, and bearing the Tatar brand on one of its buttocks.

"Whose steppe-mount can that be?" he thought, though he did not ask aloud. It was not meet that a man should enter his home with a query on his lips as if he were a stranger. Before the pages had time to seize the horse by the bridle Oleg dismounted, treading carefully on his injured leg. For close on six years the wound had not healed. Lameness was unbefitting a great prince! A curse upon such infirmity! In order to conceal it from the people he invariably tried to dismount as near the porch as possible. Also he sprang into the saddle from the doorstep. Had he lost an arm he would not have minded so much. A scar across the face or a hand palsied by a wound served as embellishments to a warrior. Not so a lame leg. A prince must walk proudly among men. It did not become a prince to hop about like a sparrow. In an endeavour to improve his gait, Oleg thrust out his chest when walking and squared his shoulders, little realizing that this merely made his halting gait more conspicuous to the public eye. Often the vexatious thought flashed through his mind: "Mitia of Moscow always comes unscathed out of battles."

Once the boyar Kobiak insinuated:

"Methinks, Prince, Dmitri must be somewhat of a coward. He goes to the wars but is never wounded. He avoids fighting. 'God,' he thinks, 'created me with a heavy and unwieldy body.'"

But Oleg knew only too well that Dmitri did not spare himself. Because of this, Oleg, too, went into the thick of the fray, fearing lest a rumour should reach

Dmitri's ears that Oleg of Ryazan lacked courage. How pleased Dmitri would be were he able to say: "Prince Oleg is a craven."

"No, Dmitri Ivanovich, I shall never give you cause to say that of me."

Oleg stepped over the threshold in silence.

"A messenger awaits you in the audience chamber, Prince."

"Who from?"

"From the Horde."

"What's his business?"

"He will not say. The message is for your ears alone."

"Let him wait. I shall wash first."

"He says it is great news."

"From the Horde? He can wait."

The page poured water for the Prince out of a copper ewer which had been made in the Horde, and the water trickling into the chased basin made a sound like a far-off song. Oleg wished he might go on listening and enjoying the warm flow of the water.

As he dried himself with a linen towel he meditated. "What news could possibly come from the Horde? The Horde was beaten and humiliated. For a long time its voice would not sound in Russian ears. As a matter of fact, would it ever sound again? Will not the Tatars wish in future to live with us in peace, to establish a stable frontier such as existed of yore with the Polovtsians? Is this the news he has brought? Have they come to seek my friendship? Thus it would seem that Dmitri had pulled the chestnuts out of the fire for Ryazan. In their wrath against Moscow they want to make friends with Ryazan."

He took his seat on a broad bench covered with a black rug, while with ring-bedecked fingers he smoothed his damp hair.

Through the door appeared the head of Sofroni, the Prince's confessor.

"May I come in, Prince?"

"Enter!"

Sofroni was well read and knew many languages. He was wise and reserved. His reticence made him appear even wiser than he was. He was surrounded by people who uttered their thoughts openly, meditated aloud. Many felt antipathy for Sofroni. "Here," they would say, "we have a priest with a bald pate and a hoarse voice. Besides, how could he be tonsured, seeing that he has no hair for the cutting thereof? It must have been a tricky job to perform." Still, Sofroni owed his high office to his erudition. His eyes, green as a cat's, leered at Oleg as he made obeisance first to the ikons and then to the Prince.

"Well, father?" asked Oleg.

"There's a man from the Horde."

"Why is the household in such a flurry about him? Does Ryazan rank lower than the Horde?" Then, yielding to Sofroni's insistence, he dispatched a page.

"Summon him to my presence."

The page disappeared, but it turned out that the messenger, who was already waiting outside, stepped across the high threshold and stood by the door, his eyes dwelling on the priest and the page.

"Leave the room," Oleg ordered the page, while detaining the priest.

The messenger hastily crossed himself and bowed to the Prince. There he stood thin and wan, his clothes covered with dust, his hair dishevelled. In his white face only the mouth flamed red and the tongue thirstily licked the swollen lips.

"What have you to say?"

Having rushed to the great Prince through wind and steppe, through the

silence and darkness of forests, the messenger, scarcely opening his mouth, suddenly gasped as though he had only just arrived. His face crimsoned, while his lips almost inaudibly murmured :

"Father . . . lord . . ."

Then abruptly, haltingly, hissing, at times shouting, at others hardly above a whisper, the words dropped out. Mamai was advancing with all his forces, to avenge the insult.

"But he aims at Moscow," objected Oleg.

"To avenge the insult brought upon him by Russia, lord," insisted the messenger.

"But we are Ryazan. We have not insulted them."

Oleg interrupted himself on a sudden :

"Does Moscow know of this ?"

"The tidings were for yourself alone."

"Who sent you ?"

"The news was brought to the Russian enclosure by the captive Klim, a slave of Mamai's. He heard it from Mamai himself. And we saw the assembling of the troops."

"But whom can Mamai muster now ?"

"He's scraped together a great army."

"Well, they are only scrapings."

"There are about sixty thousand of them. Perhaps even more."

"Who may you be ?"

"One of your own horsemen. While in Sarai, I disguised myself as a monk to avert suspicion."

"Tell my servants to heat the bath-house for you. You need a good wash."

The messenger left the room. A malicious joy gripped Oleg's heart. Moscow, all unaware, was carousing and celebrating the victory. The Muscovites' heads were still swimming with the intoxication of the Vozha triumph. Yet the coffin was already made in which Moscow would be placed on the board instead of the festive viands.

Oleg turned to Sofroni.

"That's what comes of routing the Horde."

"Better send a message to Moscow," the priest advised cautiously.

Oleg averted his eyes. All were driving him to Moscow. Even Efrosinia was with them. Suddenly Oleg said :

"We have to consider this carefully. If we oblige Moscow, whom shall we put up against the Horde ? Our people are dispersed. They are collecting the crops on their demesnes. And as to Moscow men, they have never defended us before."

"Moscow soil is Russian soil," said Sofroni. "Besides, a messenger could be sent secretly. None would be the wiser."

"But what if the secret becomes known ?"

"That depends on us."

"And on the messenger. Also on Dmitri."

"The messenger's tongue is short and Dmitri's memory is long."

A page entered.

"Where shall we house the messenger, my lord ?"

"Let him join the retinue. He will have to say that I sent him. And tell him to stay there."

Stooping slightly, Oleg rose. Sofroni followed him absentmindedly. Before reaching the vestibule, Oleg said :

"I can decide nothing now, father. I shall have to think matters over first."

He limped away towards the stairs.

So it had come at last! The head of the Horde had received a blow. But the wounded beast, in its death agony, sought to crush its trapper. "Both will perish. Then will Ryazan rise to the zenith of power over the whole Russian land. Oh no, I shall not send a messenger. Let Dmitri carouse! Death is sweet when it overtakes a man in his cups."

Oleg caught sight of an oil-lamp burning before an ikon on the top landing. It was one of Our Lord, "not made by human hands". This was Dmitri's favourite ikon. Though Oleg already had his foot on the bottom tread, he paused and lifted his head towards the ikon, saying:

"Bless me, Lord God. Methinks this has come to pass according to Thy will. I dare do naught against Thee. I shall not snatch the cup from Thy servant Dmitri, neither shall I divert him from Thine avenging hand, nor place a sword in his hand in lieu of the cup."

He crossed himself devoutly.

Sofroni remained standing and watched him as he lightly mounted the stair to go to Efrosinia's apartments.

Then the priest likewise made the sign of the cross while gazing into the wise eyes of Our Lord. He bowed towards the deserted stairway and walked speedily out of the Prince's court.

Chapter XXIII

DMITRI

ONLY WHEN THE BELLS OF MOSCOW HAD CEASED TO BOOM AND THE WREATHS OF incense had been wafted away after the services of thanksgiving; only when the merrymaking over the victory of the Vozha was over; only when the tears of widows had been dried and the wail of bereaved mothers had died down; only then did a weight slip from Dmitri's shoulders and he knew that the bloody struggle with the Tatars was nearing an end.

He rose before it was light. Snow fell softly. Day was about to break. While dressing, he sent a page to the stables.

"Tell them to bring my horse round, and be quick about it."

He issued forth as soon as the sound of the chain clanking by the porch reached his ears. The page, trampling the fresh snow under the heels of his green boots, stood there clad in a short red fur coat and foxskin cap. He stroked the neck of the fiery, dark bay charger.

"Ready, my lord!"

Dmitri paused for a moment, joyfully inhaling the fresh odour of snow. He wore a fur coat with trimmings of squirrel. A short sword hanging from a red strap was the only sign which betrayed him to be a warrior. He commanded the page:

"Run off and bring a horse for yourself."

He raised himself in the stirrups so as to arrange the skirt of his coat under him. He playfully allowed his mount to have its will, only to pull it up so as to make it feel the master's hand.

In company with the page, he galloped past the guard, who made way for

their passage, entered Moscow, cantered through the suburbs, and rode along an unfrequented road leading to Valui's estate.

Heavy lumps of hardened snow fell from the horses' hoofs; a flock of terrified crows scattered from among the trees. Now and again a woman, in a bright-hued shawl, would nervously slam her wicket and hasten up the porch steps. Anything might be expected from fighting men!

Before reaching Valui's domain Dmitri reined in his horse. The page behind him pulled up abruptly and stood rooted to the spot. Dmitri restrained his high-spirited steed and listened. Today there was no one singing on the other side of Valui's fence. On his hasty way hither he had not thought there would be no song at all. He glanced back at the page. The stripling, young Prince Bielozerski, was looking at him with an expression of the utmost devotion, in readiness to dash off at the slightest sign from Dmitri. The foxskin cap slipped down on to the boy's domed, narrow forehead.

While Dmitri was slowly passing Valui's wall he endeavoured to peep over it. But the wall was high and, as far as one could see, the yard deserted. The lane now descended steeply to the river. Dmitri went down it at a foot pace. Suddenly his heart stood still. From the river, her head drooping as if she had been crucified, came a woman stooping under a yoke. Dmitri flung himself from the saddle, handing the reins to Bielozerski.

"Lead the horses up the hill, lad, and wait for me there."

He stepped down to the river. The woman, hearing the crunch of snow, stopped in her tracks and anxiously raised her head. The whole of her face was wrapped in a shawl so that only one eye was visible—a slanting, sad and gentle eye.

"Is it water you are carrying?" Dmitri asked.

"You can surely see that for yourself."

"Give me a drink."

Twisting the yoke from her shoulders, she raised the bucket to Dmitri's lips. He gulped down some of the ice-cold water and wiped his moustache with the palm of his hand.

"Why do you not drink spring water?"

"A cat was drowned in our well a little while ago. There's been no time to reconsecrate it. We can't drink unclean water, can we?"

"Not very well."

"That's why I carry our supply up from the river."

"What is your name?"

"Sanka."

"Are you from Ryazan?"

"How did you guess?"

"I've heard you singing."

The woman laughed.

"And who may you be?"

"I'm from the Kremlin."

"Oh, you live in high places."

"I have a word to say to you."

"Speak. From whom is your message?"

"I heard you singing about the Tatars. You've been cruelly used at their hands."

She bowed her head.

"It just happened that way."

"Well, those Tatars are no more. They have paid for their ill-usage of you."

"How?"

"With their lives. Have you not heard?"

"Ay, who has not heard? Were I only to catch a glimpse of Dmitri Ivanovich, even from a distance, I'd prostrate myself before him. It's as though he knew of the torture I've been through."

"He knows."

"Where could he have learned about it?"

"Listen, Sanka. Dmitri knows all about you. He has heard. He has issued orders to tell you: 'Do not weep, Sanka. And if you can find the time, come to the Kremlin. As you walk through the Kremlin, sing as if it were a feast-day. Have no fear.'"

"That's a wonderful speech. It seems as if you were speaking about me and not to me. What do you want of me?"

She stooped to place the buckets on the snow. Then she straightened herself and looked up at Dmitri.

"What can you be wanting of me? I do not understand."

"If the Prince pays your ransom to Valui, will you come into Dmitri's household and sing?" But he thought to himself: "I did not come for this."

"'Tis better to sing than to weep. Therefore I sing."

"Dmitri himself ordered me to give you this message, Sanka. 'There is nothing to weep over now. If you need anything, say so and your wishes shall be granted.'"

"It sounds like a fairy tale. Give thanks to our lord when you see him. Give him thanks for his kind words."

Dmitri remembered how he had wished to come to her straight from the field of battle, to make her happy, to shower gifts upon her, to sit down beside her and ask her to sing.

"Perchance I shall come again some day," said he. "Will you sing for me then?"

"Well, I . . . Why not?"

With a swift movement she drew the shawl over her face so that not one of the scars showed. She shielded her eye with her hand.

"I do not know you, warrior. Do not molest me. Leave me. I cannot make things out. I'm frightened of something or perhaps yearning for something . . . You must be off now. I am a bad woman. Go!"

"I've seen you, Sanka. You have no need to be afraid. We shall meet again."

"No! Please go away. I am late as it is."

"At least allow me to give you a hand with your water-buckets."

"No need. You'll only spill the water. I'll manage by myself."

"As you please. Farewell."

He strode to the top of the incline. Dmitri had set out for this place with the idea of how happy he would be were he to interrupt her song by calling over the wall:

"Sing a merrier song, your torturers are no more," and then be gone on his way.

Instead, something he was unable to fathom had taken place. Whence had come that intense longing, as though what he needed from her was more than her songs?

Bielozerski kept pace with him, marvelling the while, for his master was alternately frowning and blushing.

They returned to the Kremlin.

By the porch stood an unknown priest wearing a gold cross round his neck, bareheaded and shamefully bald.

"Whence comes such a one?" Dmitri asked in surprise.

"I've been waiting for you, my lord. I come from Ryazan," answered Sofroni, after an exchange of greetings. He followed Dmitri up the steps of the lofty porch, which was ornamented with crimson stripes.

"What have you come about?"

"A calamity, my lord. I have galloped all the way to see you. We have received news that Mamai is marching on Moscow."

Dmitri did not move.

"Whence comes this news? It is not so long since I chased them out."

"A messenger arrived from the Horde. He says: 'They are moving.'"

Again to prepare! Again to fight! Will there be time?

"Was it Oleg, by any chance, who sent you?"

"Oh no, my lord, not Oleg. I came on my own account."

"Strange!" Then, shouting to Bielozerski, he dismounted. "Hasten, page, and fetch Prince Bobrok. If you find him at home, tell him to come hither without delay." Then turning to Sofroni, he inquired: "You are a priest it would seem?"

"I was Oleg's father confessor."

But Dmitri, quickly dismissing the priest from his mind, leaned over the balustrade of the porch and called into the courtyard:

"Yaklev!"

"Here I am, my lord."

The Grand Prince ordered him to send out messengers to summon the boyars.

"They are to assemble here forthwith."

Then, turning to Sofroni, he said:

"So that's how matters are? Then why did you make such speed to arrive here?"

"But, my lord, our Russian land is not expecting misfortune. Maybe we can save her from it."

"We shall see. Put on your cap. You are none too well provided with hair, and 'tis a cold day."

"So that's the kind of man you are."

Dmitri chuckled.

"How otherwise should I be?"

"I would gladly serve you, my lord."

"You serve God. That is more honest. Begone! I shall summon you later."

He gave a soldier orders to conduct the priest to a rest-chamber. But his agitation did not subside until he saw Bobrok ride into the courtyard on a black, foam-flecked charger.

"Dmitri Mihailovich!"

"I know, I know. The page told me. We shall have time to make ready. All said and done, we are not more foolish than the Horde, are we?"

"Nevertheless, it is very hard on us. Our shoulders are still aching from the battle of the Vozha, yet now again . . ."

"If shoulders are aching it proves that heads are sound. The Moscow regiments are marching from Kolomna. Well, I've sent orders that they are to turn back to Kolomna again. We'll have time, Dmitri Ivanovich."

When all were assembled, Sofroni was called in, and Dmitri with his boyars

listened to the whole tale he had to tell. The priest repeated his news, and suddenly, speaking with great ardour and rapidity lest he should be interrupted, he related all about Ryazan and Oleg—everything he had kept to himself for so long.

When the council was over and Tiuchev was preparing to take his departure, Dmitri asked him :

"I think, boyar, you have a knowledge of the Tatar tongue?"

"I speak Tatar, my lord."

"Be ready. Maybe there'll be need for you to go there."

"At your service, and right gladly, Dmitri Ivanovich. I have something on my mind I have long wished to tell you. A short while ago the merchants in the market booths came to see me. 'Report to our sovereign lord,' said they, 'that if need should arise to break the Tatars in this way or that, let him set about it. We shall not begrudge him the wherewithal. The Tatars impose great restrictions on trade.'"

"I knew that long ago. Once Russia is freed, business will go easier with them. But I care not for them. No, not them. Other things are hard to bear. The Horde burns down our towns, oppresses our people—and for this we have to pay tribute. As for money, there is plenty without having to resort to the merchants. The money for the tribute is collected from the people by myself. Hence the means wherewith to rout the Tatars."

With a firm tread Tiuchev descended the steps of the Prince's porch. While the council was sitting, the elusive snow of autumn had melted. But towards evening the ground froze again and crunched loudly beneath quick, light footsteps.

On reaching the lane, Tiuchev paused, undecided as to whether he should pursue his way to his home or turn off into the cathedral, in whose precincts at this time of day he was almost sure of encountering many of his friends.

He saw a girl running across the road. A short jacket was thrown over her shoulders and her face was completely concealed by a large shawl. But one eye flashed a rapid and searching glance in Tiuchev's direction, and immediately, without staying to consider, he quickly followed her. She flitted on in front as if evading him, and it seemed as if her feet failed her while she ran, her step was so hurried and faltering.

"Seems as though she were running away from sin," mused Tiuchev. "Yet she is obviously a bondwoman. I wonder whose? Could she have committed fornication with someone and now be trying to hide?"

The girl did not enter the cathedral, but, hastily crossing herself, merely turned her face towards the porch and then continued to run.

Scratching his grey head, Tiuchev mounted the steps of the squat Church of Our Saviour. He was at once confronted by an unkempt, round-eyed old man who stretched out long gnarled fingers towards him, crying :

"Stop, boyar!"

Tiuchev wondered: "A lunatic? A fool of Christ?"

Moscow was full of such peculiar folk. They were to be found in every church porch and tavern. They were treated charitably by all, because, save for charity, there was nothing for them either in Moscow or throughout the length and breadth of Russia. Cripples, aged men, erstwhile warriors, persons whose homes had been burned over their heads, orphans—all flocked to the churches, monasteries, taverns, places where people, going in fear of sins committed or in gladness before committal, were full of mercy and without spite.

"What do you want?"

"Stay, boyar! See my nakedness, my destitution, my old age. It will ease me, relieve me, if even one of you witnesses my condition."

Tiuchev felt irritated. His thoughts were still running after the girl with the quick, fiery eye. He was inclined to stand and dream about this unknown bondswoman in the dim stillness of the cathedral. Impatiently, before the image of her could dissolve, he placed his foot on the second step and tended a groat to the beggar.

"Remember me in your prayers, old man."

But the ancient seized the skirt of Tiuchev's black coat.

"Wait, wait, let me tell you about my troubles."

"What do you want of me?"

"I tramped all the way from the Voria, from Troitsa monastery. I could barely drag one leg after the other. I thought: 'I'll seek a Moscow boyar. Mayhap there they'll tell me the truth.'"

"Speak," said Tiuchev, on the alert.

"Moscow is a wretched place."

"Moscow wretched?"

"The city is not more golden than Sherenski wood. The tower is lofty, but its poverty is deeper. See how many there are of us here—idiots, cripples, naked and orphaned in the frost. The cottages here are larger, but have you seen how children in them gnaw crusts or eat a mess made of pigweed?"

"Is it otherwise elsewhere? God wills things thus. There once lived a rich man whose brother, Lazarus, was poor."

"I reared three sons. One went with Dmitri to Tver. He was killed there. The second returned from Smolensk dragging his leg in a sling. Yesterday we discussed how he was to live. Today, for the first time, he stands here begging for alms. I passed by to see whether people were giving. But there are so many poor devils. How can they all be given alms? My third son fought on the Vozha. Nothing has been heard of him since. Is he alive or buried there? Now, let me ask you, how will Prince Dmitri Ivanovich reward me? What kind of compensation will he give? Tell me truthfully."

"What is it you need?"

"The abbot is now claiming the monastery tax from us. We belong to the monastery. We till the monastery's, Abbot Sergei's, land. We have to pay in corn and money. Sergei says: 'You are four.' And I say: 'We are just myself alone.' . . . 'If so, go off the land. I refuse to leave such a holding in the hands of a decrepit old man. You settle down with us in the Troitsa and praise the Lord God, and I shall install another man to cultivate the plot.' But it was I myself who reclaimed this land in the forest, burned it out, dug up the roots. And now I'm expected to give it up!"

"Our sovereign lord cannot dispose of monastic lands. There the monastery is master."

"But my mistress comes from the Prince, from his wars."

"Thus it has ever been. The people share with the Prince the burden of wars."

"Share with the Prince? Where, I should like to ask, is his burden? Why, this very morning, he and a page raced past me on horseback. Nothing wrong with the Prince. He's well fed, ruddy-cheeked, and stalwart. But what about me? On his horse was a gilded chain: it's time I was tied up with an iron chain like a dog. I'm angry, hungry, grimy and dirty. Chain me up, boyar. For a bowl of soup I'd strangle anyone you ordered me to."

Tiuchev peered into the old man's bleary eyes and then turned his back on the cathedral. Though he walked fast, the old man caught up with him and again seized him by the tail of his coat.

"Stay, boyar. Why do you refuse to answer?"

"I'm too busy. Let go."

"Do you imagine that I am the only one in such a state? You will have to answer us all."

He veered towards the cathedral and called:

"Brothers! Come along here. The boyar will give an answer."

Several beggars scrambled down from the porch. Tiuchev saw their faces, which appeared greenish in the dusk, their stinking, tattered coats, dishevelled locks, wild, lacklustre eyes.

Sharply he wrenched his fine coat from the old man's clutches and seized the hilt of his sword.

"Have done!"

The jerk made the old man slip. Tiuchev crossed the square and sped towards the Prince's Court.

"Have you seen the boyar Brenko?" he asked.

"He still tarries with the Prince."

But Brenko was already descending the porch steps, joyously drinking in the pure, frosty air.

"Mihail Andreich, a word with you. At Our Saviour-in-the-Forest the villeins are wagging their tongues too freely. You should look after them."

"Eh, what's there to worry about? I'll send someone immediately. I'll soon put the matter to rights."

"To be sure. What is there to worry about?"

"That's my meaning. You'll not see a single one of them when you go to vespers. Impudent rascals! Talking, indeed!"

"They crowded round me, seized me by the coat, spoke ill of our sovereign lord."

"Had you no sword by you?"

Tiuchev felt ashamed. He had a sword, but had fled.

Disconcerted, he took his leave of Brenko. He heard a group of Brenko's lads marching quietly towards the Cathedral of Our Saviour-in-the-Forest.

Chapter XXIV

THE ADVANCE ON MOSCOW

THE STEPPES WERE BLURRED BY THE SEPTEMBER MISTS. SQUALLS OF WIND AND rain swept across them. Saddles were never dry. Leather felt clammy with moisture, and drops of rain dripped from weapons. Whenever the sun pierced through the clouds, steam rose from horses and clothes.

Once again the Horde was on the march.

The army met caravans. The leaders of these enviously cried out to the warriors. The escorts guarding the caravans begged to be allowed to join the cavalry. Every man was greedy for booty.

Heavy goods bought at small cost in Moscow were dispatched to Sarai on camels; bulky bales of forest furs were slung across the camels' backs. Costly

wares from Sarai were transported to Moscow—leather, textiles, weapons, silver ornaments for beautiful women. Silks and other fabrics from distant lands were resold to Moscow at great profit by the Horde. Not for nothing had the Horde planted itself on the trade routes to China, Turan, Persia, the Crimea, and Byzantium.

The Horde army met many a heavy-bearded, broad-shouldered Russian merchant as it marched along. The Russians peered silently at the Horde from under their bushy eyebrows. Quick-eyed pilgrims halted, leaning on their staffs. Reticent monks turned away severely as though campaigns, wars, and mundane passions floated past them like acrid smoke. They were going to the Horde by the old trade route and showed their permits. They were detained for a while and then sent under escort to the interior of the Horde.

Bernaba, priding himself on his Russian, tried to enter into conversation with them :

"I meet you and speak. Humble your pride. It is right you weep so your sins be forgive. From now you are no longer Russ but Tatar. A sheep, if it not stray from fold, will receive no hurt. But the Russ are no more."

Few answered such talk, and those who did were not understood by him. It was as if the Russ had a language peculiar to themselves while they listened dumbfounded to Bernaba's broken Russian.

Bernaba said to Mamai :

"I questioned a man we met. A stupid, uncouth sort of fellow. Didn't seem to understand plain Russian. He speaks as if he were chewing his own tongue."

They moved across the steppes according to the ancient custom, fanning out over the wide expanse. Thus do locusts spread over crops. Thus does a steppe fire advance in a cloud of black smoke.

But on reaching the forest Mamai ordered his men to go quietly, to spy out the land on the fringes, concealing themselves from Russian eyes. Moscow must not be given time to rally, he must attack unawares. In the past no such precautions were necessary. Now times were different.

Mamai's mount, kept warm by a thick saddle-cloth, proud of its Arab blood, seeming to scent the presence of other horses in the wood, neighed, and the forest sent back a prolonged echo. Mamai struck it on the head in an endeavour to silence it. The beast reared, but the man kept his seat securely.

Mamai led his army forward without respite. The marches were long ; the halts brief.

The Russian September greeted them with rain and cold. At night, a white tent embroidered with monograms was pitched for Mamai. The rugs smelt of warm steppe grass.

One afternoon late in September the army crossed the Vozha higher up the river than where, a month earlier, the warriors of the Golden Horde had fallen and where Tatar horses which had reverted to the wild roamed the forest. At nightfall warriors pitched the tent. Klim brought in the rugs. The army was nearing Moscow. On the morrow they would have to face a long and rapid march.

"We've passed it," said Bernaba. "Still, it would have been better had we been able to assemble more men."

"Where from?"

Bernaba turned pale. Mamai smiled. The more blood he shed, the quicker it ebbed from the countenances of his companions.

"Have no fear. There are enough men."

"If we can take them by surprise."

"They won't have the sense to be on the lookout for us. Do you miss our games of chess?"

"Is it your wish, khan, that we play?"

"I'm not yet khan. Go to bed."

But Bernaba tarried.

Klim brought in supper and, dropping to his knees, spread a cloth on the carpet. A soldier, leaning on his long-shafted spear, entered to mount guard. Mamai addressed him banteringly:

"Well, have you seen the Vozha? It is narrow."

"To many it has proved to be more than neck-deep," answered the soldier.

"What's that you say?" asked Mamai sharply.

The soldier did not meet his master's eyes, but silently adjusted the straps of his breastplate. Klim, while placing the food on the cloth, listened to the conversation.

"What's that you say?" repeated Mamai, pouncing upon him.

"I was regretting those for whom the Vozha was higher than their helmets. They would have been useful to us now."

"You are bold. But boldness is sometimes born of fear."

The soldier said nothing, and after a short interval Mamai dismissed him. Bernaba remarked as the man left:

"I do not like this."

"It's liable to happen on a campaign."

"What are you proposing to do with Moscow?"

"What would you yourself do?"

"I should order that the city be razed to the ground: churches burned down; ikons and books destroyed. I should forbid the singing of Russian songs. Let them sing in Tatar! I should teach the monks the Koran, should deport the Russ deep into the steppe, should give their women to Tatars. Let them breed Tatar children! They must forget their own language. I should appoint Tatars to trade in Russian goods. Thus Russia would become the Horde, and when Russia becomes the Horde, we shall remove her farther. We shall overrun the whole world. Mamai will rise higher than Ghenghis. This is simple and strong——"

"You've thought it out well," interrupted Mamai. "You are quite the Tatar, I see."

"Ay, when my wish is to see you rise and rule the Horde."

"And you beside me?"

"Yes, beside you."

"You are right."

Outside the tent an ass started to bray in the darkness. The frenzied noise sounded as if the beast were rolling downhill.

Mamai and Bernaba lay down.

When he had stretched himself on the rugs Mamai pondered how he would launch an avalanche of horsemen against the foe. How a second wave would follow. How he would crush the enemy. While he himself, at the head of the third wave, would hurl himself upon the enemy. Then the way would lie open before him. The whole country would lie prostrate, as it had in Batu-khan's day; the whole country to the very shores of the Arctic Ocean.

The ass continued to bray. That animal should be appeased, thought Mamai. But he was loth to move and give the order. Tomorrow he would tell them to get rid of the ass.

Bernaba felt warm and snug under the rugs, but he could not sleep. His body relaxed, yet still sleep eluded him. He heard the irregular respiration of the scheming Mamai, and thought: "What if Mamai's blade should suddenly snap? Or Mamai's silvery charger suddenly trip? Who will raise me then out of the wayside dust? My fate is linked with Mamai."

He lay listening to the breathing of his fate, when suddenly the carpet covering the entrance to the tent was flung aside. Murza Tash-bek, a flaming torch in his hand, entered. Neither Mamai nor Bernaba heeded the flare. What they saw was the terrible, twitching face of the murza blazing in the torchlight.

"Why have you come?"

"To see the Prince."

"Speak."

But Tash-bek all at once grew timid, and spoke as from a distance.

"Prince, I do not like the look of our warriors. Their eyes are red from sleeplessness and the cutting wind. We advance hastily and furtively as if we were thieves."

"That is as it should be."

"Our warriors are dispirited and sullen. They sit silent round the campfires. And if they talk they stop at my approach."

"Go on."

"When I asked them why this was so, they answered: 'We move rapidly and secretly like thieves. That means Mamai is afraid.'"

"Sheep!"

"They refuse to go any farther."

Mamai sprang up.

"You are always the first with bad tidings. Are you glad?"

"Prince!"

"You are always the last when speed is needed for a task. How dare they?"

"Question them yourself."

Mamai drew on his boots without delay and went out.

The fires of the bivouacs blazed. Rosy pines reached up into the black heavens. The soldiers were grouped around the glow. All were silent. Mamai alone questioned them:

"Are you afraid?"

The men remained silent.

"He who forsakes the road will never return. Our road runs through Moscow."

Still they said never a word.

Mamai gave a nod to his captains. There ensued shouts and the hiss of whips through the air. But neither the lash nor persuasion could break the mood of the troops of the Golden Horde, the men who were wont to fling themselves unthinkingly and joyfully into battle. Mamai ordered that the most stubborn should be singled out.

"So that you shall have nothing to fear, I myself will strike off your heads."

More wood was added to the fires. The flames rose higher. Veterans were dragged to the blaze and forced on to their knees. They said:

"One's own sword strikes more lightly. Strike!"

Mamai was at a loss. He realized that the invincible army was in the grip of fear, and fear is stronger than death. Before their very eyes flowed the river Vozha, and the Vozha seemed to be alive and black with Tatar blood. To the kneeling men, whose heads were bent to receive the death-stroke, Mamai said:

"Stand up!"

He returned to his tent.

The regimental commanders were already assembled. He guessed that many of them were triumphing over him.

"Speak !"

They hesitated to begin, for what they had it in mind to say was : "Turn back. This is not the season for campaigning. It is autumn. We should be attending to our farms, our cattle, our gardens. We must return to the Horde, there to rest and gather strength, heal the terror of defeat as one heals a disease." But how could one venture to say such things ?

"Speak, I say. The moment has come."

They all remained silent. Mamai was the only one to speak that night.

"You want to say 'Go back' ?"

Suddenly he remembered the khan's mouselike ears and the arched eyebrows of the khan's wife.

"No ! There is no going back for us. We shall return with spoil. We shall master victorious. Afraid of Moscow ! Go tell them to sleep. Let them sleep soundly. Tomorrow morning I shall lead them where they will find booty. We can manage without Moscow, but if we are not victors there is no road back to the Horde."

And when, surprised at his outburst, they turned to go, Mamai exclaimed :

"Have we split the hoofs of our horses and ridden till we're saddle-sore for nothing ? Each of us needs a little more gold and a greater number of slaves. Both of these wishes will be granted you."

He saw that their eyes lighted up. During the night this light would burst into flame and by the morning their hearts would burn with the desire for battle and booty. He knew men.

After all had gone, he lay down again and rolled himself up in his rugs. But rage mastered him. He plucked at his coverings, gnawing and tearing at them.

Bernaba said nothing but heard everything that passed.

Outside the felt tent the sentries stamped to and fro, and the frozen grass crunched under their feet. Mamai calmed down.

Surprised, Bernaba raised himself and contemplated the prince.

Mamai sprawled on his back, his wry mouth half open, his hands crumpling the tumbled rugs. Sleep had smitten him instantaneously like an arrow.

But Bernaba could not sleep. Long and meditatively he gazed at his slumbering master.

Let the whole Horde sleep indifferent to the coming day ! Bernaba could not be indifferent. He tried to foresee, to discern, to think over what the coming day held in store.

He lay silently, fearing to disturb his master, fearing to close his eyes.

When at dawn kumiss and water were brought in, and the rugs were flung back from the mouth of the tent, one could see the cloudless green sky and the vast stretch of white, frostbound earth.

The entire army stood in readiness. Before sipping his kumiss, Mamai set his forces in motion along the route which he had disclosed only to his commanders. Anxiously and sternly he watched to see whether his men stepped out willingly and alertly. And as though a burden had fallen from them, they joyfully turned their horses away from the Moscow road.

Then only did Mamai, his lips parched with thirst, glue his mouth to the wide bowl, brimful of white, autumn kumiss.

Chapter XXV

THE TATARS ATTACK RYAZAN

KYRILL WALKED UPHILL TOWARDS THE TOWN. ARRIVED AT THE GATE, HE PAUSED and looked back. The low-lying suburb was already shrouded in mist. Somewhere below a dog was alternately barking and whining piteously. Perhaps it sensed the coming moonrise.

Sentries had assembled at the Pronski gate and, having lit their lamp, they stood facing the light, chatting.

The town noises were dying down. The smithy alone was still at work. People stood or lolled on the doorstep. There were merchants homeward bound and artisans who talked among themselves staring into the fire, not looking at their interlocutor. It seemed as though they addressed the fire, and the words they spoke were calm, gentle, coming as it were from the depths of their hearts, as if the fire shed a light on what remained obscure to themselves in their own minds. Their eyes never blinked even when the hammer struck a blow on the soft warlike blade.

The armourer glanced up and saw Kyrill.

"Be seated. Tell me all about it."

"About what?"

"Whence you come. Tell us all about it."

The people ceased their chatter; there was friendliness in their eyes as they looked at Kyrill and waited for him to begin.

"'Twould take too long. They won't let me through for the night."

"And where do you think of staying?"

"At Gerasim's, by the ferry."

"How do you propose to get there in the dark?"

"Oh, I'll get there all right."

"Come to my place. I'm just finishing off this blade. It's my last for the day. Then I'll jog along home."

Kyrill was awed by the severe aloofness of the Ryazanites. He thought: "They're grim people!" But this invitation issuing from beneath such frowning brows warmed his heart.

"Very good of you."

"He's an excellent fellow. No need to be afraid of him," said a puny dyer, waving a hand stained with blue at the armourer.

"Such a stalwart chap wouldn't be frightened. Had I his strength I wouldn't be afraid of going outside the town at night."

"What sort of strength are you alluding to?"

"We saw you today. You dragged a loaded waggon out of a rut. Besides, it's plain for everyone to see. You can't hide such shoulders as yours under a cloak."

Kyrill realized that his morning's altercation with the peasant about the horse was known to all those present. Evidently he was the talk of the town!

The flames in the forge had by now died down, the embers glowing softly through a bluish haze.

The Ryazan folk dispersed to their homesteads.

Kyrill walked away with the armourer.

The swordsmith's home lay not far from the Prince's domain, and Oleg's

mansion, with its saddle-shaped roof, rose high towards the misty sky through which the moon was now sailing.

The house was surrounded by a fence. It was not lofty, but strongly built. The fancy wrought-iron braces and hinges sparkled in the moonlight. A wooden chip fastened into an iron holder was burning within. The shadow of the stand, elongated by the flame from the chip, danced on the wall. It was as fantastic as a water plant. An obscure interior, the thin quiver of a small flame, usually awakened in Kyrill the memory of a far-off land. . . . Water plants. The Bosphorus.

Before bowing to the company, Kyrill crossed himself.

Silently and dispassionately, the woman returned his bow. Children could be heard breathing on the bunk above the stove.

He partook of a meal, sharing the bowl with his host. The housewife made him a bed on the sleeping-shelf behind the stove.

"You'll find it quiet there. We have no cockroaches," said the armourer.

"The cricket is a nuisance," observed the hostess.

Her sister explained apologetically, not to Kyrill but to the host :

"The cold weather has apparently set in. That is why he has come inside. We've searched in every nook and cranny, but could find him nowhere."

"Let him be ! A cricket makes a house feel cosier."

His wife replied :

"Yes, let him be."

Night fell.

At rare intervals from the distance, possibly from the city gates, came the sound of metal clashing against metal : the sentries were striking on cast-iron plates. From time to time cries could also be heard : those were the sentries calling to one another.

Night enshrouded Ryazan.

Prince Oleg awoke while it was still dark. He could sleep no more. He thought about Moscow, about Ryazan. His wife was sleeping quietly and he was anxious not to rouse her. So he crept softly out of the bed and went to the door. Setting it ajar, he peered out.

A page sat on a bench whiling away his solitude by assiduously picking his nose.

"You'll break your finger," said the Prince. When the boy, hiding his hand behind his back, glanced adoringly up at Oleg, the Prince ordered : "Find out if the bath-house is heated. Tell them to get it ready. I am coming presently."

Oleg looked out of the window. Through the opaque Genoese glass he saw the water-logged meadows beyond the Trubezh enveloped in a frosty mist and crows preening their damp feathers.

He pulled on white felt boots painted with a red design, flung a white sheep-skin coat over his underwear, and went out. A spiral of blue smoke rose above the bath-house. Shivering sentries paced from tower to tower along the wooden fortress wall. The path to the bath-house was white with hoarfrost. The page, boyar Kobiak's nephew, stood chatting with the bath attendant.

"You young scamp ! I told you to be quick, and here you are standing about."

"See, Prince, the bath-house is heated, so why hurry ?"

"Run off to Mariam and tell him to bring some mead."

The sloe-eyed stripling was rushing back to the mansion when Oleg recalled him.

"Any news of your uncle ? Is he back yet ?"

"He had not come back yesterday. They say the harvest is very good. I expect he's still busy."

"Well, run along."

Oleg had a fondness for the boy, in whose face Tatar eyes blended with the heavy Slav nose. Agile and indolent, affectionate and bold, he was growing to manhood at Oleg's court. Prone to tease his fellow-pages, he was not strong enough to defend himself when they retaliated. More than once Oleg had had to shield him from attacks and accusations. He would not have offered his protection to old Kobiak, but the Prince pitied this lad.

The antechamber to the bath was thickly strewn with golden straw. Oleg undressed. The bath attendant, carrying a large ladle, went to a tub full of cold water. A crust of ice had to be broken before the ladle could scoop up water. The attendant brought in an icy draught of air as he returned with a ladleful of water. Oleg shivered.

"See, my lord, how cold the weather is. We are quite a long way from the Feast of the Intercession, yet it is wintry already."

He dashed the water on a heap of red-hot stones. With a whine and a hiss the steam rushed up to the ceiling. The moist smoke filling the air stung the eyes.

Straining his brimming eyes, Oleg made for a bench and lay down. The attendant scourged him lightly with a silky bath-broom made of juniper and allowed him to recover his breath.

The room was filled with a strong, sweet smell of juniper sap.

Avidly and copiously, the body absorbed the thick warmth while an oily perspiration oozed from every pore. Oleg's numerous scars and ulcerations tingled pleasantly as the attendant carefully massaged him. According to long-established custom, the attendant accompanied his ministrations with sympathetic comments:

"There's not a spot that is sound, my lord. The whole of your small body has been maimed for the sake of us sinners."

Oleg winced.

"Gently with that leg," said he.

"Of course, my lord, I'm being as careful as I possibly can."

"It seems to be healing."

"Ay, the blue spot looks smaller."

"Truly, it has diminished."

The Prince was trying to console himself. For five years his leg had not healed. It was as if some poison had lurked in the spear which had wounded Oleg in that day's battle.

"Aie! You lout, are you crazy?" Oleg expostulated in a rage. The attendant had dowsed the Prince with unbearably cold water.

"Forgive me, my lord. All my fault."

But with vigour renewed, the body responded to the ensuing warmth and voluptuousness.

Oleg rose and the attendant rubbed him down with a soft linen cloth, and offered him a ladleful of mulled mead flavoured with peppermint instead of the usual hops.

"Mariam's a wonder at sweetening mead. Though decrepit, he's wise."

"Very much so, my lord."

"There, finish it off."

Suddenly there was a rush of cold air from outside. A page bolted in but stopped to bow on the threshold. He tried to see through the vapour.

"The door ! Shut the door !" shouted the attendant.

"What's afoot ?" cried Oleg.

"Prince, where are you ? Come quick ! The Tatars !"

"What ?"

"The Tatars."

Oleg darted to the door, but the bath attendant intercepted him and managed to throw a sheepskin coat over his nakedness.

Dripping with sweat, his hair dank with vapour, he sprang forth into the frosty air. A cloud of steam enveloped him ; the hoarfrost melted wherever he placed his bare feet. He leapt on to the city wall. At once a dozen black arrows stuck in the beams above his head. He drew back and saw the Tatars.

Mamai's troops were advancing, encircling the town. Fresh companies were riding up from beyond the hills, but even those who were already beneath the walls formed a vast multitude.

Despite the autumn mists the flaming colours of striped coats, red trousers, tousled beards of the spearmen waving in the wind, and bushy caps were visible. Some of the men, clad in skins with the fur turned outwards, looked like monstrous bow-legged dwarfs. Steel breastplates jangled, horses snorted and squealed ; but the men kept silent as they stole slowly up to the city. Mayhap they were merely awaiting the signal to hurl themselves headlong forward. The Tatars looked at the grey walls of the town, the dark towers, the grim, squat might of Ryazan which seemed to have withdrawn into itself. When Oleg sprang on to the wall, everyone had seen the naked body under the sheepskin. But his lameness served him well, for the Tatars, reckoning on a straight-stepping target, missed him.

The tocsin sounded from the cathedral belfry.

Strong hands seized Oleg and pulled him into safety, across the courtyard and into the mansion.

"Recover your wits, my lord. What sense is there in going out into the cold in such a garb ? You are frozen."

"Let me go."

"Dress first."

"Let me go, I say."

His hair and beard were stiff with frost and his whole body was shivering.

The tocsin boomed. People were hastening to man the walls. As they ran, soldiers buckled on their swords. A bonfire was kindled in the centre of the courtyard, whither a huge cauldron was being dragged. Pitch was to be boiled in this to pour on the heads of the assailants.

The tocsin roused the men-at-arms. But the number that assembled was small, for the Prince's retinue with their troops had dispersed to the countryside to collect tribute.

At the armourer's where Kyrill had stayed the night the hut was still in darkness, though the stove had already been lighted and the black smoke crept along the ceiling to the vent-hole. Only the women, illumined by the red glow from the fire, emitted light, their dishevelled shadows meeting and parting like two elongated bears on the wall. The sound of the tocsin reached Kyrill where he lay on the shelf behind the stove. He raised his head.

"Is it a fire ?"

The armourer wrenched open the door.

"Ah, woe is me !" he cried.

Dazed, the women stopped dead by the stove. Kyrill made all haste into the

yard and peered over the fence into the street. The tocsin boomed. People were hurrying along.

"What's the matter?"

"Tatars!"

"Tatars!" shouted Kyrill. Thrusting aside those who impeded his progress, he ran into the hut. He seized his sword, which had been stowed away at the head of the bed, and raced along to the city walls. Down an alleyway Princess Efrosinia galloped on a barebacked horse. Young Prince Fedor and several pages leading pack-horses loaded with tightly crammed carpet bags were scuttling in her wake down towards the Trubezh river.

"That's a bad sign. The Prince's kith and kin are saving themselves."

But Oleg, now encased in armour and helmet, had taken his place in the forefront of the battle and was beating back the initial onslaught of the foe.

Many citizens of Ryazan were on the walls paying back arrow for arrow, raining down curses, and hurling great boulders. Bundles of swords and spears had been taken from the Prince's cellars. These weapons lay in heaps, and the men, as they mustered, seized them and scrambled up the walls. From the suburbs and the neighbouring villages grim fugitives were still arriving; women who had strained their voices with crying lost them when they saw a man stagger and come hurtling to the ground, where he lay with arrows piercing chest or ribs. Some of the fallen men had been pushed off the walls by their comrades so as not to impede movement in the limited space at the top of the barbican. The wounded crawled away and their kinsfolk ran to them trying to raise them.

Kyrill mounted the wall and, brushing past Oleg, hid himself behind a projection. From here the whole of the enemy forces was in full view. Advance detachments were scaling the walls, parrying the blows dealt them by the Ryazanites, seeking cover for themselves from the arrows and swords behind painted shields. They pushed on towards the central tower, which was being defended by Oleg in person. Their reserves stood at the ready.

Clad in a scarlet coat and a superb white turban, Mamai rode by the walls on a slender-footed silver-grey charger. Several murzas followed at a leisurely trot.

"Taking stock of the fortifications, the scoundrel," thought Kyrill. "Now's the time!" He wrenched a bow from a neighbour and his arrow whizzed past Mamai's ear.

The silver-grey horse curveted, while Mamai, flourishing his whip, retreated from the wall.

A stream of black arrows struck the projecting beams above Kyrill's refuge.

"God has saved me!"

Another arrow slid over his shoulder.

"God has saved me!"

He saw the corner tower over the Gleb gates catch fire.

"The infidels have set fire to it!"

Buckets were rushed up to quench the fire.

But increasing numbers of arrows soaked in oil and all aflame rained down on the oaken city. There were not enough hands to put out the fires. A huge flaming arrow, speeding over the Prince's wall, fell on to the roof of his mansion. The dry pinewood planks sucked in the burning naphtha and started to smoulder.

Kyrill saw that Oleg was wounded and was being forcibly dragged from the wall and lifted on to a saddled horse. The gates leading to the Trubezh river were still open to traffic; there were no Tatars there. A black-bearded Ryazan warrior led the Prince's steed by the bridle out of the battle.

A nimble young woman ran up to a pile of swords and seized hold of one. Somebody called aloud :

"Not that one, Ovdotia. Here's a lighter one."

An old woman with a long face knelt on the ground while she took aim and discharged arrow after arrow. A dark stain was slowly spreading over her blue gown. Blood.

And still the tocsin boomed while the smoke obscured the sky and made the eyes smart.

All were yelling at the tops of their voices—Tatars and Ryazanites alike. Women wailed and shrieked.

"Maybe we'll meet here, Aniuta?"

A Tatar's head, protected by a shield, appeared above the battlement, and the woman who had taken the sword dealt him a backhanded thrust from underneath his shield. The shield flew from his grasp and rolled at Kyrill's feet.

"Ah, but she's like Aniuta."

But her name was Ovdotia, and it was not long before an arrow brought her down.

She cast a quick glance at Kyrill; then, turning, she crawled to the ladder and prepared to descend.

"Aniuta!" exclaimed Kyrill, emerging from his refuge.

An arrow struck his cheek and glanced off into his beard. While extricating the shaft from the hair, smoke rose and concealed her from his sight. During the two years of separation the smoke of memories had veiled the face of his beloved. Would he recognize her now amid death and lamentation?

He shook off the blood which had trickled into his beard, but the woman was nowhere to be seen. Had she fallen off the wall or climbed down the ladder? Not far away, Tatar shoulders were showing above the barbican. Kyrill turned to face the foe, but his mind lingered at the spot while he wondered where the woman had got to and whether he could do anything to help her. "Might she not have been in very truth my Aniuta? No, only someone resembling her."

His hands automatically parried blows until he came to himself, and then he immediately found the correct thrust to rid himself of his assailants.

Thus they fought till noon. But the town was in flames and smoke dimmed the light of day. In places fire crept along the city walls. The flames in the suburbs were like gigantic sheaves of corn rising above the churches of Boris and Gleb.

More boats laden with refugees were crossing the Trubezh; women and old men were fleeing across meadows towards the woods. The corner tower had crashed and the Tatars were breaking through a breach in the wall.

Ryazan spears still played havoc in the enemy ranks and the last remaining ladles of boiling pitch were poured on the heads of the detested cavalry. But Tatar hoofs already tramped through pitch and weapons over the corpses of Ryazan's defenders while their scimitars flashed above children's heads.

The walls were burning, and to man them any longer was out of the question. Having torn a coat-of-mail and helmet from a dead soldier, Kyrill had for some time been fighting in martial array. His face was stained with blood. He descended from the wall and threaded his way along the narrow, smoke-filled alleys.

Horde soldiers sprang up in front of him, but he fought his way through their shields and scimitars. He had noted the route by which the Ryazan Princess had escaped to the river. But when he reached the banks no more boats were

to be seen. Were he to try to swim across, the weight of his armour would drag him to the bottom. Yet there was no time to unharness. So he ran along the bank among bushes and willow thickets.

High above him on the edge of a cliff he saw silhouetted against the sky a silver-grey charger and the khan in his white turban, with his retinue of murzas. Mamai had set his heart on entering the burning city from this, the higher side. Kyrill hid until they had passed, then he walked on. But again he came to a halt.

Tethered to a tree on the verge of the precipice stood a delicately limbed bay horse. Later Kyrill saw its rider. A man in rich raiment strode down to the river and then sat among the bushes intent on his business. Confident in the victory of the Tatars, the horseman did not expect to meet anyone here.

Quickly Kyrill clambered up the slope, feverishly clinging to the branches, and, finding himself between the horse and its rider, made a downward rush at the man. The latter had no time even to straighten himself before Kyrill hurled himself upon him and sent him sprawling. Then he twisted and bound the captive's arms. Next Kyrill took a good look at him. The prisoner had round eyes and a lofty brow. He was so terrified that he gaped open-mouthed.

"Well, you're caught," said Kyrill, "while I am here safe and sound."

The man remained silent.

Cautiously Kyrill climbed to the top of the incline. The Tatars, absorbed by the town, had passed. The beautiful horse stood unguarded, jingling its gilt chain.

Kyrill untied it, and, butting his shoulder under the beast's chest while pressing the bridle at the corners of its velvety mouth, he led it to where his captive lay.

In such wise did Kyrill capture Bernaba.

He tightened Bernaba's bonds, flung him across the saddle, and, leading the horse, sought for a place where he might ford the river. A low, sandy islet, with a bush whose roots clung tenaciously to the soil, seemed to denote a ford. Steadying himself by the bridle, he was stepping into the stream, when he heard the sound of hoofs. Instantly he let go the rein and drew his sword. A Tatar was galloping towards him, his striped coat, caught in at the waist by a strap, flapped on either side of the saddle. A corselet, worn over the cloth coat, glittered, but the man's sword remained in the scabbard. A foxskin cap concealed his bearded features.

"Nothing to fear," cried the Tatar, though he drew rein and glanced back. There, behind the trees and bushes, thick smoke streaked the sky. Ryazan was burning. Voices and screams merged into a distant roar. The Tatar dismounted.

"Lord God, what has befallen Ryazan?" he exclaimed while crossing himself.

Kyrill stared at the red hair brushed to one side in order to hide the missing ear. He waited until the Tatar turned to him and asked:

"Where's the ford?"

"I'm looking for it myself," replied Kyrill reluctantly.

"Be quick about it, then."

"Who are you?"

"A Russian. I fled from them."

"A fine sort of Russian if you helped to set fire to Ryazan."

"But I didn't. There was no other way of escape."

"How did you manage to do so?"

"Mamai lost his own man and sent me to look for him. And here's the very fellow to be sure, on your saddle."

"If what you say is true, take soundings of the ford. Your horse is lighter."

Thus Kyrill and Klim crossed with Bernaba to the woods on the farther side of the Trubezh.

Tatar bugles sounded the rally from the heights above the stream. They were summoning the troops from looting and bloodshed.

Kyrill and his companion felt the need for putting a greater distance between them and the city.

Again Ryazan disappeared from the face of the Russian land.

Chapter XXVI

SKIES ABLAZE

THEY FORDED THE RIVER. CROUCHING IN THE BUSHES, THEY LISTENED. STIFF dry leaves crackled on the cold branches. A pall of grey smoke hung over Ryazan.

Kyrill was trying to gauge how best to sling Bernaba across his saddle so as to leave sufficient room for himself.

"Let him go on foot," advised Klim. "Else you'll tire the beast."

Kyrill failed to understand.

"Take Bernaba down from the mount. String a noose round his neck and lead him along. You will hold the lasso."

"But he'll be strangled."

"Never fear. Just put on the noose."

Bernaba raised his head and rebuked him in a hoarse voice:

"Oh, Klim!"

"He's angry," said Klim, shaking his head.

Kyrill cocked his ears in surprise.

"Why, he seems to understand our language!"

"Not much. I taught him myself."

"Why did you teach him so badly?"

"In the Horde they think that Russian words have remained unaltered since the days of Batu-khan. They use antiquated Russian or the language of the Chronicles. Is it my business to open their eyes?"

"Maybe they think that Russia, too, has remained unchanged since the days of Batu-khan?"

"Ay, they think that, too."

"Yet they burn our towns."

"Well, that was Oleg's fault. He didn't expect it, eh?"

"They were surprised in their sleep."

"So I saw. Yet 'tis strange. How was it that they were surprised?"

"What do you mean?"

Klim raised his eyes and looked gloomily towards smoke-shrouded Ryazan. Kyrill repeated his question.

"How would they have known beforehand? Probably even the frontier guards had dispersed to their villages."

"It's too late to examine all this now. Let's move on lest they catch us."

They quitted the willow thicket. The wet horses stepped out more briskly. Bernaba was led on a leash. Thus the Genoese was compelled to remove farther

and farther away from Mamai. The lasso, which was made of horsehair, pricked and hurt his neck intolerably.

The slender-legged bay was restless, pulled hard on the rein in Kyrill's firm grip, squinted to right and left, reared on its haunches ; but Kyrill's knees pressed it so hard that it became breathless. Only the movement of its ears, now pricked up, now lying flat, betrayed its wily efforts.

"A steed full of mettle," said Klim with approval.

Bernaba panted and strained on the halter. He crinkled up his forehead in an endeavour to catch a glimpse of Kyrill from under his eyebrows.

"It's no horse of the steppe," added Kyrill. "Not of Tatar breed. They are thickset and short i' the leg. This one is as taut as a bow-string."

"Perchance it's Frankish," ventured Klim at a guess.

But Bernaba shouted angrily, choking as he spoke :

"Tauromenian."

"What is that for an outlandish word," cried Kyrill, not understanding.

"Look at him," said Klim. "Your Frank is angry. It appears that the horse is Tauromenian, and you don't know its value. Likely as not, Mamai gave it him as a gift."

Kyrill bent from the saddle and asked :

"Is that so ?"

But Bernaba did not deign to notice his question.

"I tell you he's angry," repeated Klim, shaking his head.

With intent to put as great a distance as possible between themselves and the Tatars, they rode on till dusk. Nor did they spare Bernaba's legs. As twilight gathered, after crossing fields and copses, they reached the forest. Once safely in the shadowy woodland, Kyrill drew rein. He asked Bernaba :

"Are you alive ?"

But Bernaba held his tongue.

"Oh, he'll be all right," exclaimed Klim.

Bernaba spat in sheer disgust.

"I did not realize what sort of a scoundrel you were."

"And what would you have done ?"

"Throttled you."

By now they had come to a halt and were loosening the saddle-girths. Klim asked wearily, out of curiosity :

"What for ?"

"You are a traitor."

"Liar ! I did not betray Russia. The Horde is not my motherland."

Bernaba was silent, and reflected : What was he forbidden to betray, he a Frank in a Tatar coat . . . Genoese Kaffa . . . Tatar Sarai . . . or far-away Genoa whence his kinsmen had come ? He had rebuked a slave for betraying his master ; but is a son acting rightly who betrays his own mother for the sake of his master ?

After hobbling the horses, they were let loose to feed, for such horses could be relied upon not to stray far. Meanwhile, dusk took on a rosy hue as it merged into night.

Clouds trailed from the direction of Ryazan, their swollen bellies livid and red. Now they would turn to an inky blue, now flare up again to a lurid crimson glow, casting a sinister red-brown reflection on the trees. At times the breeze would waft a smell of burning and a sound of indefinable howling, but whether the noise came from wild beasts or from the Horde it was impossible to determine.

Klim moved a few paces away and, taking off his cap, prostrated himself on the ground.

"Give rest, O Lord, to their souls in the realms of the just. . . ."

For long he remained silent, gazing towards Ryazan. Kyrill approached him, and Klim said :

"It takes a long time to burn."

"It is built of oak."

"Yes, of oak. But strength lies not in the walls but in the men who defend them."

"Of that sort of strength there was not enough."

"It is thirty years since I saw Russia. Methought she was green, spacious, warm."

"It's nearly the first day of October, the Feast of the Intercession."

"Yet when I came into Russia, every tree, every bend of a stream, everything was in the wrong place. In my memory my village used to be on the left bank, yet when we passed by it yesterday it was on the right. I did not find the village, though. There was nothing left of it but smouldering logs."

"The same happened to me," answered Kyrill. "So from far away Russia seemed warmer to you?"

"Nay, it feels a hundred times warmer to me now. Who minds a bit of frost? Frost cannot congeal love. Ah, the pity of it all!"

Bernaba, who was listening to their subdued talk from a distance, shouted :

"Food!"

"Are you hungry, infidel?"

Recalling that the forest was dark and dense, they unsheathed their swords and started to chop down saplings. These they stacked round the clearing so that none could attack them unawares.

"That's a fine clearing," said Kyrill, straightening his back.

He was not afraid of wild beasts. Wolves could be dealt with by the sword—provided one was sufficiently agile. A bear had to be stabbed with a knife. But one had to have a steady hand and take care not to slip. If attacked by a boar you must manage to get to higher ground, for a boar cannot spring at you from below. Every other beast goes in fear of man and keeps out of his way. But the lynx follows him noiselessly, slinking along and hiding; or it lies in wait for him among the branches of a tree and, pouncing suddenly from above, mauls him before he has time to rally his strength. Kyrill had learned his own tactics from the lynx: to wait, then pounce on his opponent unawares; the foe has not time to rally before he is already overcome. Every man tries to imitate the methods of one stronger than himself. Kyrill was strong: he had been reared in the forest. He fancied he caught the sheen of a lynx's eyes among the trees. But the horses continued peaceably to munch the frost-bitten herbage.

A couch of saplings was piled up in the clearing and a cloak spread on the top for the three of them. Then they took food from the saddle-bags—Klim from his own, Kyrill from that belonging to Bernaba.

"I'll let your fingers unstiffen a bit," said Kyrill. "But you'll be bound again for the night. You mustn't be angry."

For the first time in his life Bernaba knew the bliss of unfettered hands.

"Are you hankering after Mamai?"

Klim said warningly :

"Don't let him out of your sight or he'll escape."

Bernaba replied in Tatar :

"I did not know you!"

"What's that he is saying?" asked Kyrill, who had not understood.

"He's repenting that he did not make away with me in the Horde." Klim laughed and addressed the Genoese severely: "Henceforth you must know that we have no slaves among us. Even in captivity we always look forward to regaining our freedom."

Bernaba turned away and for long remained silent, gazing at the stationary shadows in the gloom of the forest. Then he held out his hands to Kyrill.

"Bind them and let me sleep."

Kyrill tied up the man's feet likewise.

"Sleep."

Bernaba did not go to sleep, however, but lay listening. Kyrill was speaking:

"I suffered much as you have when I was away in Constantinople. I was always dreaming of Moscow. In my mother's yard grew three birch trees. The girth of their trunks seemed immense. Three of us children could not encircle them with our arms. But there was a hollow into which one could shove one's head. I used to boast about them to the Greeks: 'Huge are the birches in my mother's home. None such are to be found in Constantinople.' When I returned to Moscow, the whole town had altered, but the birches were still in their accustomed places. 'What's the matter with you?' I thought. 'Are you shrivelled with age?' But no, they were green and feathery. And I could easily clasp their boles round with my own arms. And I did. Had my mother's birches become smaller or was I bigger? Then for the first time I realized that I had grown up. That's what homecoming means."

Bernaba lay listening.

He kept awake long after the other two had fallen asleep. Towards morning he dozed. It seemed but a moment since his eyes had closed when Kyrill jogged him awake.

"Time to be on the move."

The forest was still enveloped in darkness. But Klim was already busy getting out the provisions. He held out a piece of stale girdle-cake.

"That will put heart into you."

But to Kyrill he handed a large chunk of mutton encased in fat. Kyrill held out a piece to Bernaba. Klim stopped him.

"He'll get along quite well without it."

An unexpected smile broke over Bernaba's features.

"Right, Klim. I, too, look forward to freedom, though my freedom is not here."

"Would you stab me if we met again in the Horde?"

"No."

"Very well, then, take some of this and eat. But I hope you are speaking the truth."

"I am."

"All the same, Kyrill, you'd better keep a wary eye on him or he'll escape."

"True enough," acquiesced Bernaba. "You'd do well to watch out or I might escape."

The mist was clearing. They pushed on towards Perevitsk. Many fugitives were flocking thither from Ryazan.

"Surely Aniuta has gone there also," thought Kyrill.

He had Bernaba still on the leash, though the noose was no longer round the prisoner's neck, but encircled his wrists. Thus the captive from the Horde could look about him with increased ease.

During the day the light filtered through the trees. Emerging from the forest,

they struck a fence enclosing a small field. Here and there among the stubble were heaps and stray wisps of straw, but this was obviously not the place where the corn was threshed.

They passed round the fencing in search of a trail to a village. The one they found led to another enclosure. Here was a well-swept place where threshing had been done, so clearly a village could not be far distant.

But for the enclosures there would have been no harvest at all, for un-shepherded cattle roamed at large over the free pasturage. Wild beasts, such as boar and bear, did great damage to the crops: boars would prowl in the rye fields nibbling the sweet young shoots; bears preferred oats just when the ear was filling out. Although a wooden fence is no great obstacle to a wild animal, it does serve as some sort of barrier to depredations.

The hamlet stood on a steep hillock beside a woodland brook. It consisted of two homesteads. One of them was decayed and lopsided; the other looked strong. The owners had apparently moved from the old home into the new one, leaving the dilapidated dwelling for fresh settlers. At places between the ancient beams bright drops of resin oozed from recently felled logs. The old inhabitant had done the repairs methodically, not piecemeal.

The peasants had locked themselves in—as though one could defend oneself by sitting tight! Kyrill realized that an eye was glued to every chink. He rode up to the door and in a quiet, persuasive voice asked them to open.

"We only want a little milk to drink. We've been travelling all day through the forest and are exhausted. Never thought we'd come out alive. Now that we have come out our own folk hide from us as if we were Tatars."

An old man's voice, cautious and muffled, sounded from behind the door:

"Whence come ye?"

"Ryazan. The town's been sacked. Haven't you heard?"

"How could we?"

"Please open to us."

"Just a minute."

Obviously the entire family was scrutinizing the group through the chinks.

"And suppose you be Tatars?"

"We're not. We are Ryazanites."

"Then why are you in such motley garb?"

"This man is our prisoner."

"But if you've been burned out, how comes it that you have a prisoner?"

"Oh, have done and open to us."

Kyrill sensed that they were still observing his party closely. He dismounted and pulled from his belt a small tinder-box. The old man queried hastily and loudly:

"What are you up to?"

"I'm going to set fire to your place and then hop it."

"Stop! Stop!"

A weight was rolled away from the door. A heavy wooden bolt creaked. The low squat door opened. An old man, broad-shouldered and long-bearded, stepped over the threshold. He screwed up his eyes against the light and said querulously:

"There now, have it your own way. Kill me."

But the words were hardly uttered before he was on his knees and bowing to the ground.

"I know not what kind of folk ye be, but if ye have mercy in your hearts have mercy on me."

Kyrill looked at the old man's long, dark-grey linen shirt, which was as though covered with eternal dust; at his ragged coat of coarse homespun; at his striped trousers.

"We come in peace. Do not fear us, father," said Kyrill gently.

"Well, may the Lord save you. 'Tis good if true."

"It is true."

"So the infidels have burned down Ryazan?"

"Ay, all of it."

"The forest has seemingly saved us."

"Looks like it."

"Sure you're not Tatars?"

Klim said:

"See, we've got a Tatar on the leash."

"That's excellent—if true."

By this time fair-haired children were peeping from behind their grandfather and the housewife was descending the porch steps with a chunk of bread and a birch-bark ladle full of milk in her hands.

The old man said nothing while Kyrill accepted and sipped the milk. Then his patience gave out:

"Look here, has Emilia Lykin, the boyar of Ryazan, been gathered unto God by the blade of the infidel?"

"Is he a kinsman of yours by any chance?"

"Nay, we pay him service tax, and if he's killed he can't claim it."

"How much?"

"Two measures."

Suddenly Bernaba addressed Kyrill:

"How much do they pay? I did not understand."

"So you've been listening, have you?"

"I understood all the rest."

"They sow two measures of seed corn. The acreage is reckoned by this. The land is calculated according to the grain, not the grain according to the acreage to be sown."

The old man was becoming apprehensive.

"Does the Tatar understand our speech?"

"He's a clever man."

Realizing they meant no harm, the old man invited them into the house. But they explained that they wished to leave before the daylight had quite gone.

"Well, did you hear anything?"

"About Lykin? Even if he is killed, another Lykin will turn up. So you'd better have the tax ready. Besides, the Tatars may swoop down on you at any time. You should try to save yourselves."

"We shall move into the woods at once."

"What about the houses?"

"We'll set fire to them."

"Why?" asked Klim in surprise.

"You're right there," said Kyrill approvingly.

The old man answered Klim:

"Let's suppose Lykin is alive? If the houses are burned down the blame can be put on the Tatars, who will be supposed to have looted the corn as well. But if the buildings are still standing Lykin's got to be paid, Oleg has to be paid so that he can start rebuilding the town. My sons would have to go, because

Ryazan will be raising a new army. It's easy enough to put up a house, but it takes a whole year to raise a crop of corn."

"Perhaps you are right," mused Klim.

"You are wise," asserted Kyrill with approval. "If I chance to be passing this way again, will you shelter me from foul weather? What's your name?"

"Gridia. Yes, come."

They drank milk while the family was carrying its meagre belongings out of the huts. Half-naked children whose only clothing was a length of homespun linen and a pair of threadbare felt boots laboured to take black pots and other household impedimenta at the run into the security of the forest. Inside the cottage the children under Gridia's guidance poured the corn into baskets, carefully lining and covering them with rags. Then these, too, were dragged into the bushes. It was obvious that some secret lair had already been prepared in the forest for such an emergency. The oats were collected and tied up in sacks. By the time Kyrill went to fetch the horses the woodland hamlet was deserted. Gridia alone remained behind to watch the lads stacking shocks of straw against the walls preparatory to setting the whole place afire.

When the three had rested they left. Once more the forest engulfed them. Soon the smell of burning was wafted towards them.

The night skies were ablaze. Birds, scared by the fires, stirred and flew about, butting into branches.

"That'll be the Tatars burning Perevitsk."

"Oh, Aniuta, woe is me," thought Kyrill. "Whither have they fled? Have they fled at all?"

It was not for Ryazan that Kyrill had fought against the Tatars, but for Aniuta. His own strength had left him in the lurch. Indeed, the full manpower of Ryazan had proved inadequate.

"But what would have happened if Dmitri had come to our rescue?"

In anguish he watched the flaming heavens. Sparks could be seen shooting up into the livid smoke. The sky was fiery red in front of them. A faint glow was discernible to the left. Only to the right, beyond the Oka, the night drowsed dark, still, and silent. That was Dmitri's side of the river, the lands of Moscow.

One road alone lay open to them—the road to Moscow.

Chapter XXVII

OLEG CROSSES THE OKA

FROM RYAZAN OLEG RODE HELL-FOR-LEATHER TOWARDS PEREVITSK. FIRES BURST out ahead and to the left. The enemy might be encountered anywhere. Several times the little cavalcade had to change its direction. Once as they plunged along the river bank, a page who had galloped in advance of the Prince suddenly drew rein, threw up his arms, and rolled under the horse's hoofs—dead. A black arrow aimed by the Tatar foe had pierced the youth's throat.

"Woe to thee, Gorislav Kobiakov, the radiant glory of thy brief span has been extinguished!"

A wrench to his bridle gave Oleg just time enough to vanish into the wood. His retainers followed. Kobiakov's steed, with empty stirrups jangling, raced after them from the ill-fated river. For some long while it seemed as though the Tatars were hot in pursuit, for there was a crackling of dead wood and a

creaking of boughs. But these fears were unfounded. The Prince avoided open roads, and stole through the forest peering this way and that.

Whichever trail the party took, the glow from conflagrations turned the men back. Villages, whole parishes, whether built on the high banks of the river or on hillocks in dense forest, were ablaze. Mamai's horsemen had scattered far and wide: marauding bands avid for plunder and captives.

Seven of Oleg's companions alone remained. One of these said:

"My lord, there is but one path to safety for us. We must leave Ryazan territory."

Oleg's heart was pierced, not by a black Tatar arrow, but by a golden, feather-shafted arrow from Moscow. Dmitri's domains, so abhorred by Ryazan's Prince, offered security while his own paternal lands were powerless to shelter him.

Oleg reined in his steed. For the first time it dawned upon him that had Mamai not feared Dmitri it would have been Moscow which would have been given to the flames and not Ryazan. It seemed as though it were not Mamai but Dmitri, with Mamai's hands, who was castigating Oleg for his pride, his isolation, all his love for the Ryazan lands.

Oleg became convulsed with rage. In his fury his scowling mouth clenched so fiercely upon his teeth that it became square in shape. Yet he did not compress his lips. He merely averted his face. Tears gushed from his eyes, and his hands trembled nervously. In silence he set his charger on the road to the Oka.

By a familiar ford the little band crossed to the Moscow side.

The same forests closed around them, the same tits flitted from branch to branch chirruping and ferreting among dead boughs and hollows in the trees. Squirrels darted lightly in the tree-tops. On every hand reigned the melancholy stillness of autumn. The quietude was broken from time to time by gusts of wind sweeping over the tree-tops. This was Dmitri's land which Oleg hated, yet outside of which he could find no safe abode. There was nowhere else to go in the haste of their flight. Their garments were rent by the undergrowth. The horses were panting, their legs were drenched with blood. Oleg's own face was scratched and bleeding. The Prince dispatched two troopers along the bank to search out a village. He himself crawled down from his mount and stretched out a saddle-cloth damp with the sweat of a horse.

He gazed into the sky. High up between the pine crests he saw the round, white clouds racing across the indigo blue of the autumn sky. It was as if even the clouds felt cramped in the land of Ryazan, so swiftly did they drive onward one after the other. "Thus are the Tatars rounding up the herds to take them to the Horde, thus will they drag us Ryazanites into captivity." Oleg had nothing wherewith to barter, nothing to pay the ransom of prisoners as he had been wont to do in days of yore when he rode to the borderlands of his principality, to the wide Rias Plain. He could not bring himself to borrow from Dmitri.

The two scouts soon returned. Not far from where the Prince had halted stood the Moscovite town of Liubutsk. Oleg had by now washed and had cleaned his accoutrements.

"Liubutsk? Why, that's where the Tsna parish church and graveyard are, isn't it?"

"That's all to the good."

But to Oleg it was not really a good omen. He would have liked to stay somewhere without anyone getting wind of his visit. A parish church meant clergy, and Prince Dmitri's men at that. How could he face them? Wouldn't

they scoff at him, saying: "Look, he's come to seek shelter under our Prince's wing. Found he could not manage without us."

"While in the settlement we noticed a goodly gathering of our own folk. Also we were told that some ladies had flocked to the church. May it not be that your Princess is among them?"

"The Princess went towards Perevitsk."

"But there are fires ablaze in that direction."

"Well, we'd better have a look."

They resumed their journey. Having received news of their approach, Fedor, riding bareback on a white horse, raced off to meet his father. To youth even misfortune brings gladness and buoyancy. Gladness because of new and unknown places to see; buoyancy because haste was essential and one had always to be on the alert.

"Father, my mother was much shaken. She lay down to rest. Long has she wept over what has befallen you. I expect by now she's in the belfry on the lookout for your coming. We brought the public treasure chest along in safety. There's a man among us who has captured two Tatars. He's a splendid fellow. I've never seen such a man as he. He spoke to me in Greek. Mamai pierced his cheek, but he laid hold of a Tatar prince and dragged him here."

Thus talking, they crossed the Tsna and were met at the foot of the slope by Princess Efrosinia.

"The parish priest wished to greet your arrival with a peal of bells. But I dissuaded him by telling him that you came hither not in joy but in deep sorrow."

"Those are words of gold, sweetheart."

"Tired?"

"Not very."

"I know better."

The priest met the party and presented the crucifix. Passing into the church, they attended the thanksgiving service for the preservation of their lives. Oleg kissed the cross and seemed to recover his wits.

"And now, father, let us pray for the slain warriors and for the people of Ryazan."

The faithful waited in silence while the priest changed his gay vestments for sober black ones. When the verger brought them tapers Oleg turned about and saw that the church was full of worshippers. Alone, on the fringe of the crowd, stood a red-haired man wearing a Tatar coat of bright hue. A scimitar hung down his thigh. His eyes were fixed sternly upon the Prince. Oleg looked quickly away.

"I wonder where that Tatar hails from?"

Oleg glanced no more in that direction. He watched the candle softly glimmering in his hand, looked at the one held between Fedor's slim fingers, listened to the mournful chanting by the clergy. The verses of the service for the dead sounded like a sorrowful incantation. As if bearing a heavy weight, Oleg's shoulders ached beneath the scrutiny of the red-haired man in the Tatar coat.

The Prince was careful not to let his eyes stray into that particular corner. He stared at the ground as he passed through the congregation, which made way for his passage. He was followed by Efrosinia, who guided Fedor by laying her hand on the boy's shoulder. Outside, a crowd had assembled to catch a glimpse of the fugitive Prince of Ryazan. Some even stood on the grave mounds so as to peep over a neighbour's shoulder. They wanted to see the stricken Prince who had once been so famous.

The princely party was offered a quiet chamber in the priest's house. The priest's wife had prepared dinner.

Efrosinia said coaxingly :

"Eat."

"Please do not force me."

They were left alone. Efrosinia sat down beside her husband.

"What will happen now?"

"It is autumn. The plough tax has not yet been collected. Once we have that in hand we'll muster fresh forces."

"From whom are we going to collect taxes?"

"We're sure to find someone."

"We fled hither. In whichever direction we looked there was nothing but smoke and fires."

"We'll manage. This is not the first time."

"That's just the trouble. It's not the first time."

"What have you in mind?"

"I mean that they have not ventured to burn Dmitri's lands. He does not stand alone. Were you with Dmitri, they would not dare touch you either."

"One does not call upon a wolf to help one in dealing with a dog."

"What do you mean? Surely he's not an infidel, is he?"

Oleg did not answer. But he thought within himself, "They dare not burn out Dmitri," and he clenched his fists. Efrosinia resumed the attack.

"It looks as though the bear has been guilty of devouring the cow. Still, it's the cow's fault for having strayed into the wood."

"Ryazan has not strayed anywhere. It stands in its allotted place."

"But it no longer stands. That's just the trouble."

Oleg found it hard to believe that all was deathly still and deserted on the site where he had raised stout oaken walls, where life had hummed and eddied around him, where women had sung and children had cried.

"We have spoken of this before, Princess. Let the destitute seek Moscow's protection. I, methinks, am a great prince."

"But who is there to rally round you? How many times have we not already been burned out?"

"Fetch me something to drink. Do not allow anyone to intrude."

"You had better lie down."

"I will sit awhile."

How often had she not endeavoured to entice him to take the other side? A Muscovite! Were Sofroni here, he would repeat the same advice. She wondered where Sofroni could be.

"I'll find out on my return."

Meanwhile Ryazan was still ahead. No need to be despondent. It would rise again.

When Efrosinia re-entered the room she noted that her husband's face was more cheerful. He asked to be given food.

Next morning he went into the churchyard expecting to gather news. Fedor accompanied him. From behind the church the graveyard stretched away towards the river. It was of a vivid green studded with broad white crosses. Many of these were painted with yellow and red designs and looked as gay as any boyar in his finery. Along the embankment ancient willows spread their branches, which had already been stripped of their leaves by the autumn gales. All around lay branches which the high winds had broken off and which were still covered with leaves. From some of these shattered boughs white rootlets

were already creeping towards the soil, while tender shoots sprouted upwards. Thus would the folk of Ryazan country, hurled at present from the heights, take root and rise once more.

Below, overgrown with willows, flowed the gentle Tsna with its abundant waters. Frost-rimed meadows lay outspread beyond, and across them a rider in a scarlet coat was galloping in the distance along the bank of the Oka towards Moscow.

Oleg's eyes dwelt upon the curve the river made round the graveyard, peacefully merging its waters with those of the blue Oka. He picked up a willow twig and, crushing its brittle joints between his fingers, strode to the church. As he emerged from the graveyard, Oleg met the priest. From afar he blessed the Prince and bowed amicably.

"Look here, Father," said Oleg, "the wind broke off this willow branch. But wheresoever it drops it sprouts and lives. We shall do likewise."

"We call this the 'white willow'. It is not pliable and therefore snaps readily."

He averted his kindly eyes and again blessed the Prince.

Oleg never learned that the rider he had seen galloping across the meadows in the direction of Moscow was the bearer of a letter to Dmitri, nor that this same letter had been written by the parish priest. It ran :

The Ryazan folk are grim, fierce, tremendously vain, proud, ambitious. Besotted by their magnificence, they have presumed, the half-witted churls, to reckon like idiots. But the Lord has humbled their pride. In a furious battle the Ryazanites have been mowed down like swathes of corn, they have been slain like pigs, Prince Oleg himself barely escaping with a small retinue and his family. Now they are hiding in my humble dwelling which stands in your glebe, my lord, on the Tsna. Thus it would seem that they consider your land alone to be safe against the foe.

Fedor tugged at his father's sleeve.

"Father, here's the fellow who captured two Tatars."

Oleg saw before him a man, tall and pale with a curly black beard, and a plaster of green pap on his cheek.

"Who are you?"

Kyrill bowed to the Prince but thought: "Who can he be?"

"I have suffered for the sake of Ryazan."

"Are you a Ryazanite?"

"I went to Ryazan, but God did not see fit to make me a Ryazanite."

"Whence come you, then?"

"Moscow."

"Whatever for?"

"Not a few come to you from Moscow."

"And you? Did you come for the same reason?"

"Ay."

"Father, he knows Greek," Fedor chipped in.

"Where did you learn it?"

"For a time I lived in Constantinople."

"What did you there?"

"I was master mason."

Oleg's countenance perceptibly brightened.

"Excellent. I shall be needing you."

"I'd be glad of a job."

"Do you know your trade well?"

"I built a tower in Moscow. It received praise."

"Then why did you leave?"

"The reward of my labour was hateful to me."

"Well, never mind. You need not tell me."

"I thank you, Prince."

"When I built Ryazan, I built it strong. The town was burned down. I built a stronger one of oak. It, too, has gone up in flames. If you come and work for me, we'll raise a city of stone."

"We shall raise it, Prince."

"How, amid the turmoil, did you succeed in capturing two Tatars?"

"Nothing to marvel at. They just fell into my hands."

"I have never seen men such as they. Are they warriors?"

"Mamai's serving-men. One's a clerk, the other is his house steward."

"Doubly strange."

"They both know Russian, and the clerk is proficient in Greek as well."

"You don't happen to be a magician?"

"No."

"Well, keep your eyes open. I'll be summoning you."

"Thank you, Prince, I'm at your service."

Oleg returned to the parsonage while Kyrill, leaving the graveyard, sauntered on to the settlement. The cottages were crammed with refugees from Ryazan. On a white stone sat a girl by herself. She gazed westward and cried softly. It would seem that she had left the cottage so as to escape the crowd.

An old woman looked up at Kyrill. She was bent with age and her face was covered with tufts of grey hair.

"There's a maid weeping yonder, Granny. Do you know why?"

"She's one of my grand-daughters from Kurchava, son. Our men freed them from the Tatars. Whither can they go now? They clung to me. I am an old woman and am glad to have them. Leave them in peace. One of them cannot keep her gaze from the direction of Moscow. This one is continually repining. I'll go and soothe her."

Dragging her shrivelled body heavily along, the old woman shuffled off to join her lonely grand-daughter. Kyrill leisurely made his way towards them and sat down near by without interrupting the old lady's gentle crooning.

"Now, Olga, stop crying. Do not weep, little Olga. Leave tears for old age. Old age is a wretched business if tears have not been saved up for a rainy day."

Her clawlike, gnarled, black old fingers closed tenderly over the smooth young shoulder. The maid's body had outgrown the girlish dress, which had become too tight so that it resembled the skin of a ripe fruit. But all granny's persuasiveness merely added to the lass's grief. Through her sobs came a wistful dirge:

"My dearie, my curlylocks, you were as bright as the sun, and as hard as a steel blade. You stood tall as a sapling. A helmet shadowed your brow."

Olga breathed heavily and then resumed her keening:

"How we should have lived and loved! We would have marvelled at God's world and have lived out our span in good counsel. I would have been obedient to you till the grave. Now the cold earth enfolds you, dry feather-grass waves over you. . . ."

"There now, Olga, there now, my pretty. You cannot mourn them all. Come."

"Is she weeping for her lover?" asked Kyrill.

At the sound of a strange man's voice Olga started and ceased her wailing. She turned her tear-stained face towards him. Her eyes were calm and gentle.

With her sleeve Granny wiped away the tears and looked at Kyrill over the young maid's shoulder.

"Oh no. She has no lover and never has had one. She's weeping for no one in particular. She says that she saw many slain on the Vozha and that, maybe, her destined lover was among them. If he had not been killed he might be with her now. I asked her: 'What was he like, lassie?' And she answered: 'Oh, Granny, how can I tell, there were so many different sorts of men among the slain.' That's why she weeps."

Kyrill left them sitting on the white stone among the sere and trampled grass. His heart ached more than ever.

"Aniuta, Aniuta, how have you weathered the storm?"

He looked back. The old woman was hugging her grand-daughter and gently rocking her to and fro, remembering some sorrow of her own past life, grieving over a misfortune long since outlived. How many were there bowed beneath affliction who sat weeping on the white stones of Russia, mused Kyrill.

During those days spent at Liubutsk, Oleg's mind was assailed by innumerable thoughts as he gazed at the high bank of the Oka which was his own territory.

He summoned Kyrill and questioned him lengthily about the distant gates of Constantinople. Kyrill told him of the white walls of buildings such as palaces and churches gleaming through thick green foliage, of white towers rising above the deep blue Bosphorus, of white cupolas beneath azure skies.

"Verily, the city of Emperor Constantine is a thing of wonder and brightness. Skilled were the hands of the builders who wrought there and their ideas were full of imagination."

"If you are clever, help me to raise another Byzantium above the Oka, a city greater than Moscow."

"My hands are yours, Prince. Your Russian city shall rise up grander than Sarai of the Horde."

"Now tell me, who are these Tatar prisoners of yours?"

Kyrill told him how he had captured Bernaba, of how, hiding from the Tatars in a lonely ravine, they had conversed all through the night in Greek, of how sweet it was once more to hear that tongue, of how Bernaba had recited verses from Omar while wolves prowled round their clearing, rustling among the leaves.

"Bring the man here tonight. I'd like to have a look at him," said Oleg.

"As you please, Prince."

That very night Kyrill introduced Bernaba to the Prince of Ryazan.

Early stars sparkled in the green sky. Black clouds trailed low along the horizon, and above the tree-tops the rosy afterglow of twilight lingered in the firmament.

At first Oleg questioned Bernaba on matters with which he himself was well acquainted, such as the glorious exploits of Alexander the Macedonian. Bernaba translated into Greek a description of the assassination of the wicked king Darius. Suddenly Oleg asked:

"What think you of Aristotle's philosophy?"

Bernaba felt out of his depth. He was not sufficiently erudite to penetrate such wisdom, so he evaded the issue:

"The Aristotelian philosophy is incompatible with Christian beliefs."

"Not all of it," retorted Oleg.

"No, not all of it," Bernaba acquiesced.

Oleg noted Bernaba's quick Genoese intelligence and his habit of drawling the clipped Greek words. It was as though, having rapidly seized their meaning, he tarried to give expression to his own thoughts while concealing their true significance. This displeased Oleg.

"He's a wily fellow!"

Bernaba wilted when Oleg asked Kyrill:

"Have you a mind to sell him?"

"Who?" said Kyrill, unable to understand exactly what Oleg was driving at.

"This Frank."

"What, Bernaba? As you will, Prince," replied Kyrill with relief. "I've no use for a slave. There's no profit to be got out of him. Only the cost of feeding him."

New vistas seemed to open up before Bernaba. This was his destiny, this black-haired, grizzling Russian prince, with the unkind but clairvoyant eyes. His coat was of a foreign material, green in colour, woven of wool, neatly tailored, while his well-shaped legs were encased in elegantly striped damask hose. And he meditated on Aristotle while dreaming of Byzantium.

"Is not this a more kindred spirit than the puny, bow-legged, grasping khan, who always smells of sour milk and sheepskin? The khan is an Asiatic, whereas this man has the deportment of a grand seigneur who casually tosses off scraps of Hellenic verse. To gain this man's favour it will not suffice to know Omar Khayyám and Omir. I must be capable of thinking for myself and become a good speaker. Ah! . . ."

He whispered into Kyrill's ear:

"Sell me, sir. I'll prove of use to you."

"Why?"

"I'll be useful."

"In what way?"

"Well, being with Oleg. . . ."

"True, you'll be with him. But how can you be of use to me?"

"I shall repay you to the full."

"I'll think the matter over," said Kyrill, not wishing to commit himself.

Bernaba spoke to Oleg about Mamai quite willingly but made his communications sound mysterious. Tatar names of persons and things sounded strange when spoken in Greek.

But when Bernaba began to tell about the Tatar army refusing to march on Moscow, Oleg interrupted him and dismissed the two men. In the gathering twilight they could not see his face.

At last news arrived that the Tatars had gone, leaving in their wake smoking ruins and mutilated corpses. One could return to the charred ruins of the city, whither the soldiers still left alive and the inhabitants who had taken to the woods were already flocking.

Chapter XXVIII

THE VEGETABLE PLOT

BEFORE DAWN THEY FORDED THE RIVER AND PUSHED ON THROUGH RYAZAN territory.

On the way they overtook wounded men and fugitives who had been burned out of their homes. Soldiers in search of their Prince rode up.

At the stopping-places the parish priests came out to greet them with crosses held aloft. Dismounting, the Prince attended memorial services amid the charred remains of churches. Slowly they drew nearer to the town of Ryazan. And with every step the ordeal of seeing it appeared more and more alarming. By the time a hillock alone stood between the Prince and the burned city not one of the company had the courage to look at Oleg.

He urged his horse to the gallop, raised himself in the stirrups, and dashed up the slope. Fedor alone followed him.

There it lay. The beloved, familiar mounds stretched before them; embers still smouldered, fragments of wall stood shrouded in black, while the ramparts, as though scalded with pitch, were streaked with burned earth which had flowed down and congealed. People were rummaging among the ashes, wandering about in the acrid atmosphere.

The wailing of women could be heard as if they were mourning their dead in a cemetery.

Without a backward glance Oleg galloped to the ford across the Trubezh. He was met and surrounded by scores of people, but no cheers were raised. He was greeted by the moans of the folk who wept over their ravished land while the tears coursed down Oleg's cheeks. When he reached the site of his erstwhile princely mansion, he said:

"This is not the first time, brothers. Much of our blood and many tears have flowed on this spot. Weep not, neither must you lament. We still have our hands, and axes are not blunted by fire. We shall raise a city finer and stronger than ever before. Strength is what we need, and that we are still capable of assembling."

He issued orders that dug-outs be made. He sent messengers to discover which districts had remained unscathed, with commands to tax-payers immediately to deliver grain to the stricken towns.

Kyrill walked away, stepping over the charred logs. Not far from the prince's mansion he noticed some sagging beams. This must denote a secret hiding-place or a mead cellar. He got the impression that a human being was breathing painfully or scratching about in the deserted and out-of-the-way harbourage. He stooped and with a great effort heaved the scorched beams apart. A woman's hand rested upon the beams from below. With another heave on the oaken beam Kyrill managed to thrust it aside. Considerable strength was needed to move so massive a weight.

A woman's face, blackened with dried blood and with her head uncovered, peered out of the gloom. But the light dazzled her and she sank back. Kyrill pulled her out and laid her tenderly on the ground. Her hair and her square shoulders reminded him of Aniuta. But this woman was of sparer build, and her face with its compressed lips was of austerer quality.

"Ovdotia!" cried Kyrill.

She sighed but did not open her eyes.

"Does it hurt, Ovdotia?"

Then he realized that it was not the wound alone which kept her prostrate. She had lain too long in the hiding-place under the fallen tower. Tatar hands had lacked the strength to reach her. Or perhaps the foe had been in a hurry. Given a rest, she would recover. If only he could find a little milk for her. But where could milk be come by?

He chafed her cold hands for a long time until an old man approached in

answer to his call. The newcomer untied a small bag stuck in his belt, got out a herbal mixture, and placed it over two deep wounds.

"Is she your woman?"

"Encourage her."

"The bones are sound, and so long as the bones are there, flesh will grow. Do not worry, son."

"Thank you."

Other women had meanwhile gathered round and Kyrill left Ovdotia in their charge. They bore her away. Kyrill walked on, stepping over the bodies of those whom no potion would ever revive.

He left the town. The Oka flowed away into the distance; it curved round woodlands, and beyond lay the serenely peaceful meadows as though there had never been the din of battle, the sound of the tocsin, or the roar of crashing walls in their vicinity.

Kyrill descended the slope to the damp, overgrown path, which he followed to the suburb beyond the walls. Here and there a house had escaped destruction. Broken household belongings lay scattered about the yards and on the doorsteps. A shaggy dog chained to a gate-post sprawled on its back. It had been pierced by a black arrow.

Kyrill pushed open the wicket gate and entered Aniuta's yard. Though the house had obviously caught fire, it was not badly damaged. Either the wind had blown away from it or the flames had already spent themselves by the time they reached the dwelling. What damage there was had disclosed a roomy cellar containing large, empty tubs.

Huge cabbages, their frost-scorched leaves spread wide, were still swelling on the trampled beds. But though the cabbages flourished, there remained no one to eat them.

As Kyrill examined the loose soil he saw imprints of a scuffle, horses' hoofs mingled with the pattern of men's boots and of women's bare feet. Suddenly, emerging like a drop of blood, he caught sight of a ripe rowanberry on the ground. He looked around him, but there were no mountain ashes in the neighbourhood. Pulling gently on the berry, a string of beads came out of the earth.

Was this all that was left of her here below?

Where could she be? Was she lying somewhere cloven in twain, or was she trudging away into captivity tied to a Tatar saddle?

Kyrill stood caressing in his palm the poor remnants of the rowan beads.

How near he had come to her and yet how far away she was now! For long he roamed among the crumpled cabbages and trampled beds. He entered the ramshackle passage. Had she perhaps thought of him in its shelter? If only he could find a shred of her clothing . . . !

All at once he was on the alert. His ears had caught the sound of rustling in the open loft. He climbed up to investigate. But it was only the wind stirring dead leaves which had at one time been strewn there for warmth.

And still he tarried as if waiting for something to happen. Yet he had poked his nose into every hole and corner and had found no single trace of her in the place. The holding looked as though it had not been dwelt in for many a year. At last, reluctantly, he retraced his steps to the town.

As he climbed over the rampart he noticed among the ashes a speck of white linen. Surely nothing could have remained white on those mounds? Kyrill came to a halt. The little white spot was neither stained with blood, nor scorched by fire, nor smeared with charcoal. It seemed to be hiding in a narrow chink.

"Hello," he cried.

No answer was forthcoming. He strode over to the place and saw an urchin of about eight with fair hair whose cheeks were livid. The little boy clutched at the slippery logs with his thin fingers and was trying to scramble away out of reach. In one bound Kyrill overtook him and seized him by the shoulders.

"Now then, where may you be off to?"

Hardly had the words escaped his mouth than he doubled up with pain. Sharp teeth were biting his hand, from which blood spurted. Making light of the pain, Kyrill shook himself free.

"Why, what's the trouble? I shan't eat you."

He stroked the child's face.

It took the boy some time to answer, for he was shy. Gradually the fair little animal calmed down and grew tamer under Kyrill's touch. Taking the lad by the hand, the man led him away.

Meanwhile Klim had fashioned a kind of hut, while Bernaba had dragged in branches of pine and other material to make the place as comfortable as possible. But when Kyrill arrived he objected, saying:

"No, we'll take up our quarters in the market gardens. There are quite a few huts there in good condition. Besides, we'll be farther removed from the stench of death. So great a number of corpses will be long a-burying."

Hope was still alive in his heart, and it was this which prompted him. This hope led him into the deserted suburb, into the no-man's-land of cabbage beds. The hut they chose was small and compact. Here they made all speed to kindle the stove.

When the smoke had drawn away they hoisted the boy high up on the stove shelf. He neither cried nor spoke, but listened to the talk of these bearded men. They conversed in a foreign tongue which sounded to him like the twitter of birds. The lad lay on his chest the better to hear, with his head hanging over the edge.

After the cold and terrible days the blessed warmth soon made him drowsy, and without realizing it he was enveloped in sleep. But his slumbers were fitful. He sobbed, screamed, and muttered incoherently. From his rambling talk Kyrill gathered that his mother had hidden from the Tatars, but that they had found her and carried her off.

During the night the child tossed restlessly to and fro. Kyrill tucked him up and watched over him lest he should fall off the stove. In his sleep the lad's lips would drop apart so helplessly and pathetically that many a time Kyrill would clumsily pat his face with his palm, hoping thus to dispel the horrid nightmares.

Next morning, while still lying beside his foundling, who was now awake, Kyrill asked:

"Where is your father?"

"How can I know?"

"When did you see him last?"

"I didn't see him. And Mum didn't either. He was not with us."

"Where is he from?"

"Moscow. The Muscovites burned Tver and Mum met Father. He burned Tver and I stayed. But Mum came to Ryazan after the sack."

Klim grew melancholy.

"If they had not carried me off to the Horde I should by now have had grandchildren such as this nipper. As things are, I have not even children. Do let this one be mine."

"Ah, no. He's sealed his sonship by blood. He bit my hand till it bled."

"Just your luck. Children fall into your hands all of themselves. As for me, even my birthplace has slipped through my fingers. I had barely set eyes on it when it straightway went up in flames."

"Don't worry, Klim, you'll get your birthplace back again. And you'll beget children. Here you are at home. How old are you?"

"I was taken prisoner when I was twenty-two and have been a slave in the Horde for thirty years. Count that up."

"You'll marry yet; see if you don't."

"That remains to be seen."

In the course of the forenoon Kyrill found Ovdotia.

"Well, young woman, how are you feeling? Stronger and better?"

"Yes, I think I'm a bit stronger."

"Excellent!"

"Nothing to crow about. Can't you understand? The people saw all that happened and have told me. The Tatars have taken my husband prisoner. What ransom shall I ever be able to collect? My brother Senia, too, has been led into captivity. He's wounded. How ever shall I get them back from there? As I lay in the dug-out I felt the child move, ever so slightly, as a little fish splashes. We've never had any before. And now to think that it must be born in such distress! So you see, you did not save me alone. We shall pray for you all our days. It was terrible when the Tatars were stretching their hands towards me over the beams. But they hadn't the strength to touch me. Besides, they probably thought I'd suffocate anyhow."

"I, too, have a son. Found him yesterday. He's called Andrei."

"Well, sometimes a foundling grows up closer to one than a child of one's very own. Is he a stripling?"

"Nay, quite a little chap. Maybe he's eight years old. But you are like Ryazan. You lay for a while under the logs, but here you are up and about again—and with child to boot."

"Well, I have you to thank for that."

"Say no more. You yourself are strong. I saw you fighting on the walls. You were as good as any warrior."

"I was so furious. What made them come?"

"How did you manage to stay in that cellar so long without food?"

"Oh, food was not lacking. Somebody had left a store of turnips and carrots."

One day, after consulting Klim, Kyrill conducted the Genoese to Oleg's presence. He had grown tired of Bernaba, who spent his time spying out the land and saying nothing. Also he was slow to obey Kyrill's orders.

The Prince issued from his tent and Kyrill transferred the slave then and there.

"How much do you want for him?"

"I'll bide by your own price, lord."

"Seems as though my account with you will be a pretty heavy one. I have ordered stone to be brought here as soon as the condition of the roads permits. We'll start building with the coming of spring. Until that time I shall provide for you. That house steward, he's a freeman now since he escaped captivity on his own account, tell him to come to me. I shall make him my house steward."

But this suggestion did not suit Kyrill, who had no wish to remain alone in the deserted suburb.

"First of all, Prince, you should order some doors to be made. There's nothing even to push a key into."

Oleg frowned.

"Go!"

But a simple house was rapidly and neatly erected for Oleg's own use. Soon lights began to flicker in newly-built huts all over the recently burned-out site. Smoke rose from the dug-outs. The hum of human voices once more resounded over the steep banks of Ryazan city.

Chapter XXIX

THE FEAST OF THE INTERCESSION

THE FEAST OF THE INTERCESSION ARRIVED, WHEN IT BEHOVES EVERYONE TO OFFER cattle and the last reaped sheaf of corn. But the herds of Ryazan had been rounded up by the Horde and driven far afield and the harvests had been devoured by the raging flames.

Long before October 1st the cranes had migrated southward. This augured an early and bitterly cold winter.

All day long the wind blew from the east—from the Horde. A similar omen! Yes, the winter promised to be a hard one.

Throughout Russia the young maids prayed that day:

"Father Protector, cover the earth with a mantle of snow, and me, a young girl, with a bridegroom."

The autumn marriage season was about to begin. In the dark, poky dug-outs, among the still warm embers of Ryazan, the wedding porridge simmered and the din of bridal festivities filled the air.

From every direction songs rang out in praise of the Mother of God and the old pagan god of fertility, Yarilo. The elders at the festal board scratched their beards enviously at sight of the shy impatience of the bridal couples. Mothers peered through the doorways to see whether snow had fallen, for a fall of snow on this day was a good omen, auguring a happy life to the newly-wed.

That night Kyrill stood at his own gate.

Like a black pall the sky lowered ominously, while the wind chased the light powdery snow over the ground. From the town came the sound of singing and the merry laughter of girls. Kyrill listened sadly in the darkness. The ground in the dug-outs had not been given time to dry and yet people were already singing nuptial songs. The embers had not had time to cool, and already the blood was aflame. From all sides came yells and shrieks. But for Kyrill nothing remained but to stand in the wind listening to other folks' merrymaking, watching the snowdrifts as they crawled over the mounds of frozen earth. He lounged quietly by the gate. Then he stepped beyond and called aloud:

"Aniuta."

The wind bore his long-drawn-out moan away into the darkness. Surely, were she near by, she would hear him? He walked across the waste land. The snow drifted on the wind. A white pall shrouded everything and sounds of wedding songs and lamentations reached him from all sides. Never had his empty and desolate house depressed him to this extent.

"Maybe I'd better go to Kolomna and seek out Domna? No, that would not do."

Near by, in the shelter of the fences, a shadowy wolf gnashed its teeth and

leaped aside. Kyrill whistled. On the instant the wolf became threatening. It stopped dead, uttering a whine. Other wolves answered from afar.

"Calling for help!"

Kyrill remembered the boy he had left in the hut.

"This howling may frighten Andrei."

He strolled back. The wind lashed his face with the crisp, hard snowflakes which nearly blinded him. Turning away from the wind, he saw that the wolf was quietly trailing after him.

"Now then, don't pester me."

But on approaching the hut the wolf whined and stopped in its tracks. It stood still, hackles bristling. It sniffed the air, and whimpered softly and nervously.

"I wonder what it's scenting?"

Kyrill halted, too, and peered around. Blinded by the snow-laden wind, he could see nothing ahead of him. But by the gate he discovered the spoor of a bear. The snow had not yet obliterated it. The trail was quite fresh.

This was what had scared the wolf.

Kyrill drew his dagger from its sheath and made his way to the hut. The porch steps were covered with snow, but freshly-made footprints of a bear could be seen both on the steps and in the porch. A bear rambling about at this season was a terrible thing. Kyrill looked around and noticed that the door leading into the passage stood ajar, and that the trail pointed that way.

Kyrill reflected: "There, in the dark, a bear can easily overwhelm a man. But I can't stand outside in the cold till morning." He listened. All was hushed and wrapped in gloom along the passage.

Then, holding his dagger in his hand, Kyril boldly entered, closed the door behind him and paused. It was dark and quiet.

"Is it lying in wait? Or is it only frightened?"

Quickly he crossed the passage and tore open the door leading into the hut. No bolt secured the door, and in the dim light shed by a candle Kyrill saw Andrei sitting on a bench with a bear crouching at his feet.

Leaning against the wall, his cap and gloves tossed on to the floor, stood a pale and dishevelled man. Chafing and blowing on his frozen hands, he glared in frenzied terror at the dagger. With a squawk he pressed yet closer to the wall.

"Don't—please don't!"

"Where have you come from, Timoshei?"

"From Kolomna."

"How long's that?"

"Only just arrived . . . never sat down . . ."

"How did you find my whereabouts?"

"Long ago I guessed you'd come here. When I inquired at the ferry if anyone had seen a man with a curly beard and wearing a ring, they at once showed me the way hither. You are leading an open life."

"Why should I hide?"

"Well, in Kolomna they made a great search for you."

"They won't reach me here."

"Is that really true?"

Timoshei immediately ceased to blow on his fingers and cheered up considerably.

"How can they get hold of me here? This is not Moscow."

"Fine!"

"Have you been in flight, too?"

"Ran all the way. Oh Lord, what a fright I was in!"

"Why?"

"They tracked me down. I barely escaped. Grisha knew about me long before, but he held his tongue for a while. Then, of a sudden, they arrested me. I got away from one of them and the other was so afraid of Toptyga that he fled. I made a dash down the lanes with Toptyga close at my heels. Even now, I don't understand how I escaped. What do you think will happen to me now? They're sure to brand me. And then what? Will they leave me alive? Can you tell me anything?"

"Are you afraid of death?"

"Who isn't?"

"Yet you were wont to kill others."

"Ay, but then 'twas myself who did the slaying. Now the tables are turned and it's different."

Andrei barged into the conversation:

"All the same, Uncle, you'll have to die some time."

"What's that you're saying? Please don't."

Kyrill scrutinized Timoshei.

"You seem to have been frightened out of your wits."

"Would you have me brag?"

"Want something to eat?"

"Well, who was likely to feed us in the woods?"

"Did you come all the way by the woods?"

"Yes, I was scared of the roads."

Kyrill fetched broth and cut slices of bread. Tomoshei began to shiver. His hands trembled so violently that the spoon rattled against the bowl, splashing the broth.

"With mutton! You seem to eat your fill."

"Eat away!"

"Give Toptyga something. Bruin was sleepy all the way, and what sort of sleep could we ever venture to indulge in? Have no fear, the master will probably not return."

"What master?"

"The one who owns this hut. It's a fugitive's."

"A fugitive's? Well, why should he not return?"

"And for whom will he grow cabbages? The folk have gone. A hut is not a mansion. One can run up a thing like this anywhere. He will find a plot of land where there are more people. You can become owner in all security."

"So that's what you are driving at? Let them come. I haven't damaged their hut in any way."

"You speak as if it were a matter of indifference to you."

"If they return—the more the merrier!"

"But they'll be your masters."

"What of that? I'll go somewhere else. I am used to being on the move. Why are you scratching yourself?"

"I'm all lousy."

"Climb into the stove and have a wash. I'll give you some clean underwear. There's water in the stove."

Timoshei was soon undressed and threw his clothes outside to freeze in the passage. Shivering and grumbling at the cold, he potted about naked, dragging first a wooden tub and then a bath-broom into the stove. Then he asked for a candle-end, lit it, and finally climbed into the stove himself.

"Look out ! There are some coals on the hearth. Don't scorch and smear yourself."

"No matter, it'll all wash off."

One candle lighted up the inside of the stove ; Timoshei grunted contentedly and with the bath-broom whipped out of his body all the cold, terror, and weariness he had suffered. In fits and starts, he exclaimed :

"Lord, isn't it fine ! Goodness, but this is fine ! My word, it's warm in here !"

At last, red and perspiring, he scrambled out. It was time to sleep. Andrei had long since succumbed. Toptyga was pushed into the passage. Kyrill stretched himself on the locker, but Timoshei preferred to occupy the stove.

As he lay there under the great sheepskin coat he started talking :

"It isn't good for a man to live as you do, Kyrill, is it ?"

"Why ?"

"All by himself, I mean. A lone man should go and lodge in a hut where there's a family."

"What for ?"

"Do you ever hear the house demon about here ?"

"No, not so far."

"The house demon does not like men to live alone without women. Can't expect any luck in a house of that sort."

"And you, are you a married man ?"

"Of course I am. You won't catch me spending a night alone in a hut. I respect the house demon. Every Friday I sleep apart from my woman. Let him come, it's his concern."

"And what has your woman to say ?"

"She won't own up to his visits."

"And you ?"

"I beat her. I confess I do. Still she refuses to own up. She says : 'He didn't come.' But how can he not come if a woman lies alone ?"

"Perchance you have no house demon ?"

"Why should I be worse off than the others ?"

"Or maybe your house demon has fled to the Horde."

"He's not a Tatar, is he ? Besides, they must have their own Moslem jinns in the Horde."

"All right. Sleep now."

"I knew at once why you had taken a lad into your home."

"Well, why ?"

"To hoodwink the house demon. But let me tell you that not every house demon would fall into such a trap."

"Sleep, fool, or I'll turn you out into the passage."

"Nay, you'll never be able to drag me off the stove now."

The blizzard howled. The wolves whined. The two men listened. After a while Timoshei dropped off to sleep, but for a long time Kyrill kept on thinking : "Alone, alone, alone."

He dreamed of a bearded, alert little old man who sat on the stove and tapped the oven door with his tiny bast shoes.

"Why does not your woman bring in the logs ? After all, I'm cold."

"House demons are always warm."

"Eh, but listen the way it's blowing outside."

It really was draughty from the window. Kyrill moved away nearer the wall and had no more dreams.

On the following morning Timoshei told them how he had escaped from Kolomna. He owed his safety to the fact that so many fugitives had flocked there from Ryazan. Thus he was lost amid the crowd.

"But they'll find me here. They'll clap hands on me, sure enough."

"You've only got to betake yourself to the woods again."

"Easy, if I knew the way."

Kyrril probed Timoshei with his eyes. Yes, he was obviously not foxing. He seemed to be quite dazed with fear.

"I'd tell you, only are you to be trusted?"

"I've never betrayed you, have I? Grisha questioned me about you, but I hastened to warn you. 'Be off,' I said. Isn't that so?"

"Very well, I'll tell you. Only look out, don't lose your way. If you lose your bearings at this time of year you'll perish."

That very day Timoshei, with Toptyga on the lead, took the road to Perevitsk. He was bound for Old Nick's woodland hut.

Thus the winter set in.

Chapter XXX

A VISION OF BYZANTIUM

KYRILL BETOOK HIMSELF TO OLEG'S QUARTERS. IT WAS FEBRUARY, AND THE snow was dazzlingly white. It clung to the fur trimming of his winter coat. The air was clean and fresh and it was a joy to inhale it.

He overtook a transport sledge which was slowly wending its way up the hill. The horses strained on the traces and stepped in the track beaten by other hoofs. Their legs were shaggy, and long hair dangled from their flanks, for it was winter.

The great sledges going into the town were loaded with slabs of yellow stone. One of the peasants, tilting his fur cap back from his red, perspiring forehead, hailed Kyrril joyfully:

"Here we are, little father, bringing the load along."

"Is it stone?"

"Ay! We're bringing it, we are. We'll build a strong Ryazan."

"A good job, too."

"Unluckily the thaw has set in. The roads are heavy enough today, but if it lasts another day or two they'll be impassable."

"God grant that it will turn cold again."

"Yes, God grant it may be so, for this is an important job."

On the summit of the hill in the town another transport sledge was being unloaded. Muffled in a sheepskin coat, the overseer was shouting:

"Be careful, you cur! What do you think you're doing?"

The peasants were labouring as best they could, cutting their hands on the sharp edges of the stone blocks.

At sight of Kyrril the overseer ceased bellowing and bent his back deferentially. Everyone knew that this was the master builder, the Grand Prince's architect.

A small log house had been erected for Oleg's accommodation. The walls of the low-ceilinged room were hung with dark rugs from the Horde as though to prove that neither fire nor sword could destroy his princely wealth. He was

sitting with Bernaba when Kyrill was ushered in. Oleg had grown accustomed to the Genoese, demanding from him tales about the Horde and Mamai and distant lands. Bernaba served the Prince with zeal and bore himself affably towards Kyrill.

"Spring is not far distant now," said Oleg. "It is time we laid our plans as to how the stones are going to be used."

"Do you wish to make a start on the whole town at once?" asked Kyrill. "It might be better were we to begin with the towers."

Oleg ignored this remark. Then he asked abstractedly:

"Where do you propose to build my mansion? It is too noisy here, too near the market-place. I should prefer a quieter spot."

"There is a fine place on the slope above the Trubezh; you can see the Oka from there."

"Tell me what you have in mind for my mansion. I want it to be a fine building, as we agreed."

"We'll model it on the Patriarch's palace overlooking the Bosphorus."

"Well, I shall tell you what I have in mind tomorrow. Meanwhile, draw up your own plan."

"It will be done, Prince."

No more light came through the small windows, for dusk had set in early. A candle was lit and so were the lamps before the ikons. A subdued, misty light filled the room. Kyrill was about to take his leave when Oleg said:

"Tell the men to bring the blocks of stone to the spot which you will indicate."

"But they are already piling them on the site mapped out for the building of the towers. There's no point in moving the stuff from place to place."

"I am the person who issues orders. Tell the men to move the material. We'll discuss the question of the towers later."

"Very well, sire. It will be as you wish."

Bernaba accompanied Kyrill to the vestibule.

"Don't be vexed, Kyrill. I never seem to have any time for a call. How's little Andrei?"

"What could be amiss with him? He's full of pranks."

"Good! Give him this."

Bernaba held out a golden apple with a skin as thick as a boar's hide.

"Where does this fruit come from?" asked Kyrill.

"The Prince received it from the Horde."

"From the Horde?"

"He's been in touch with Mamai ever since the Feast of the Intercession. He's trying to strike up a friendship. He even wants to pay a visit to the Horde."

"What on earth for?"

"He senses Mamai's power. Mahomet-khan has been slain at Mamai's instigation and now Mamai himself has been proclaimed khan. Have you not heard?"

"So Mamai is khan."

"Now the Horde has a strong master."

"And are you hankering after serving him again?"

"I belong to Oleg," replied Bernaba.

"You're fencing. Is Oleg toying with the idea of becoming the Tatar's vassal?"

"Well, if he could retain the title of Grand Prince he would recognize the Horde's suzerainty."

"Is this your doing?"

"Forget this conversation," said Bernaba.

"Perhaps his new mansion should be built in the Horde style. But I've never seen Tatar architecture."

"Build as will be agreed upon. He dreams of Byzantium as well."

"Look to it yourself, lest you have to think out other plans."

Kyrill made to go, but paused as if in recollection.

"Listen, Bernaba."

"Yes, what is it?"

"What's his idea of building his mansion before the towers? Surely the town should be fortified first? The mansion can wait."

"You just carry out instructions. All said and done, you are entirely at his mercy. There's no sense in gainsaying him."

"More of your wiles, eh?"

"I'm not up to any tricks. I serve Oleg and do my best for his comfort," concluded Bernaba.

Kyrill walked through the town. A misty halo of light shone from the Prince's window. The sky was ablaze with stars, an icy wind was rising, it was becoming colder, and Kyrill's boots slithered on the frozen footpath.

A bonfire was burning brightly in the market square.

Peasants, wrapped in sheepskin coats, had gathered round it. Near by stood their horses, unharnessed and covered with rough sacking and overcoats.

"Are you spending the night here?"

"What else can we do? The old town's gone, and any taverns that have escaped are crammed with merchants and monks."

"The night's not all that cold. We've known it colder than this," said another peasant in a conciliatory tone.

Kyrill approached the circle round the fire in order to find the overseer and give him Oleg's instructions. One of the peasants addressed an old, white-bearded man who was doing his best to chew a crust with his toothless gums.

"Now then, granfer, you promised to tell us some stories."

"Eh, but it's that frosty."

"If your tale is too long, we'll jump about in the snow a bit and then listen again."

"Nay, for a long story warmth is needed. In these surroundings, others must be told."

The party fell silent. The old man spat out the end of his crust into his palm and stuffed the pap in his pocket. Pushing the sheepskin collar from his face, he turned to the company round the fire and began to speak:

"The Greek Emperor at one time was a wealthy man and famous. But all this passed away. Byzantium the Great sank into decrepitude. So the Greeks sat down to think out a remedy. No gifts were coming in from anywhere, the vassal peoples had forsaken them, the walls of Constantinople were crumbling, and no money was forthcoming to repair them. Now here, for instance, our walls have been burned down, but we are going to raise finer ones. There it was a different matter. Then the Greeks remembered that no one had sent so much money to Emperor Constantine as what he received from the Russian land. It behoved him, therefore, to inveigle Russian pilgrims to Byzantium. But the Russians did not feel inclined to come, for the way was long, the passage through Tatar territories was dangerous, and as for holy places—Russia had plenty of her own by then. So the Greeks set about thinking up something which would lure the Russians to Byzantium. They racked their brains until at length they

remembered that pilgrims from Russia invariably asked : "Where is Oleg's shield which he nailed over the gateway?" It was quite possible that the shield still existed, though the gates had by now crumbled away, and money was lacking for their reconstruction. The Greeks thereupon decided to erect gates of wooden planks and to nail Oleg's shield above them. Let the Russians come, they said, and let them marvel. So far, so good. The gates were put up."

"They did find some cash after all, granfer?"

"Nothing of the sort! They knocked them up out of some old planking. Now it was time to nail up the shield. But that shield had long since been lost. They hunted all through the city for the Russian shield. My, but there was a to-do! No such shield could be found anywhere, for the Greeks had never captured Russian arms. Well, they met with an old woman and asked her: 'Have you, Vassilissa, by any chance a Russian shield? Your husband was from Kiev, wasn't he?'—'Maybe I have,' says the old woman. 'Have a look in the yard.' And they actually did find a long iron one in the shed. 'That,' says the old woman, 'was brought by my husband from Kiev.' The Greeks were mighty glad, for they would have at least one keepsake of their bygone glory—Oleg's shield."

"Fine sort of glory! Oleg gave them a sound thrashing first, and then to remind them of their shame, and to keep them quiet in future, he hung up his shield," said one of the peasants.

"Hold your tongue! I know that tale. Well, they nailed this thing above the gates and triumphantly spread the news abroad. The Metropolitan sent a mission from Moscow. 'There,' boasted the Greeks, 'there is Oleg's shield.' The Muscovites glanced at it and fell a-gaping: 'With due respect to Byzantium, you must know that what Oleg conquered you with was really a trough out of which geese are fed in Kiev.' Thus was it that the Greeks renewed their ancient glory."

The stars in the frosty heavens, the wind tangling the wool of the sheepskin coats and making the flames of the bonfire flicker, the blue tints of the sky reflected on the snow, the red beards of the peasants touched by hoarfrost, the mellow, distant vision of Byzantium—all mingled together to form one strange picture. As the peasants laughed over Byzantium's futility and expressed their delight in the idea of reconstructing Ryazan with stone, Kyrill's ideas took form as he hurried home.

The story had set him thinking. He stopped, and returned to the encampment round the fire. The old man was again chewing his crust, while the peasants had thrown on fresh fuel and were preparing to lie down and sleep on the snow, for they were well provided with sheepskins.

"Granfer, where did you pick up this tale about Byzantium?"

"What's that to you?"

"The story pleased me well."

"Last summer, I carted goods from here to Moscow. I was told it there."

"I suppose it's a Moscow tale?"

"Anyway, I heard it there. You'd better be off to bed."

"I'm going now."

"God be with you!"

Kyrill had gone but a few steps when he met a woman muffled head and all in a man's greatcoat. He would have passed her by had she not called:

"Is that you, Krisha dear?"

"Hello, if it's not Ovdotia! Where do you hail from?"

"I've been to see my kinsfolk."

"Aren't you afraid to walk alone at this time of night?"

"Those whom God helps nobody can harm."

"You're a plucky one."

"I was born so."

"You seem more cheerful."

"I've thought of a plan."

"Well?"

"But it must remain a secret between you and me. I shall go to the Horde."

"You?"

"Yes, as soon as the weather gets warmer. If I can't manage this spring, then I'll go next year."

"What on earth for?"

"To ransom my men-folk."

"How does the nape of your neck feel? Is it hot?"

"Don't laugh at me."

"I'm not laughing at you."

"That's all right. Now be off with you, and remember, no blabbing."

Full of surprise, Kyrill watched her as she disappeared.

He walked over the hard snow-crust, his heels cracking and crunching as he went. The gate was bolted, but he removed the concealed stake and squeezed his way into the yard.

A candle was burning in the hut, and the boy was lying on the bench, his bare feet covered with a curly sheepskin rug.

"Why are you not asleep?"

"I've been waiting for you."

"You should have gone to sleep."

"It's dull going to sleep."

"Are you afraid?"

"Nay."

"Were you thinking of something?"

"Yes, of mother."

"Don't fret. She's all right now."

"And I'm a bit sore about myself, too."

"Why?"

"Maybe she's weeping for me. It's night, you know."

"By this time she'll be asleep. It gets dark earlier in the Horde than here."

"Why?"

"Go to sleep. God made things so."

"What about yourself?"

"I've got things I want to think over."

Kyrill took a piece of charcoal from the stove and sat down at the table. The walls of the hut, Ryazan itself, faded away. A warm sea shimmered on the white boards of the table, white birds circled in the sky, and betwixt sea and sky he visualized a marvellous mansion. With the charcoal in his practised fingers, he traced the design of that mansion on the white boards.

Here appeared the curved arch of a gateway, there windows opened like wondering eyes under the overhanging brows of a cornice.

"Oh!" exclaimed Andrei.

Kyrill turned round:

"Why aren't you asleep?"

The lad stood behind him. He was barefooted and so white and thin that he looked like a candle. He gazed fascinated at Kyrill's drawing.

"Methinks the windows might be set a trifle farther apart," he ventured.

"Then the wall would be too bare."

"No. Just move them apart."

"But how can you know what is best?"

"Why not? Surely I've got eyes as well as you?"

"Well, go to bed. I'll design them again."

"Do it first."

Kyrill laughed. The task of creating this new dwelling seemed sweeter than ever now that he had so friendly and attentive an onlooker . . . his adopted son.

By the time he had finished the new design and had looked round he found that the boy had curled himself up on the bare bench and was fast asleep. The candle spluttered, and he became aware that his feet were very cold.

Kyrill carried Andrei over to the bed while he himself climbed on to the stove. Lying in the darkness, he could see the soft, blue, moonlit sky through the narrow slit of the window, which was rimmed with hoarfrost and framed the heavens with a furry circle.

When Kyrill woke next morning and peered down from the stove the boy darted swiftly away from the table and hid under the rug.

"You're mighty inquisitive!"

But Andrei did not answer.

Kyrill lay a while longer meditating upon his design before looking at it again. Then he swung down from the stove and approached the table. In a first impulse of rage he felt like rushing at the rug and dragging forth the delinquent. But after a more attentive scrutiny he was filled with wonder.

The wide spaces between the windows were sketched in with bowed human figures, with flowers and birds. Andrei had not had time to put the finishing touches to his drawing. The piece of charcoal he had dropped in his flight lay on a corner of the table. But the windows, linked together by the design, formed a broad band round the whole mansion, while the upper part seemed to be poised in mid air supported by the stems of flowers and the wings of birds.

"Why, what an artist you are!" said Kyrill kindly to the boy. "Come, get out of that rug."

"I'm afraid."

"Nothing to be alarmed at."

"I meant to rub it out, but was too late."

"Whatever for? You'll be my helpmate."

"You're not angry?"

"Get up; it's time to light the stove."

Throwing off the sheepskin, Andrei got up and, shivering with cold, started to dress himself hurriedly.

"Judging by the sun, the spring will soon be here," Kyrill said as he opened wide the door.

Gilded by the sun the first drop crept down from the heavy icicles which hung over the door.

Chapter XXXI

THE MANSION

GRASS THRUST UP THROUGH THE FROZEN EARTH. FERTILIZED WITH BLOOD, THE hills of Ryazan were covered with verdure. The delicate green even ran across

the freshly-ploughed fields. The winter, like a snake, crept into fissures and beneath stones. When it came to assembling the stones for the building work they were found to be so tightly frozen together that it was difficult to wrench them asunder.

Yet the mansion continued to rise.

Oleg ordered that the town walls should be made of hewn oak. Oaken towers were already in the making. But the mansion itself was built of stone.

The stonecutters sang as they squared the uneven edges. The masons sang as they joined the rows of stone with mortar. The carpenters sang as they finished off the beams of the fortress. Many hands raked away the ashes of the conflagration and thus cleared the town. Around them surged the young green of woodland trees, while the meadows were bright with a riot of many-hued blossoms. The place where once the town had stood, alone lay bare and destitute. The people were sore of heart because of it. But zealous hands served it, and song resounded about it :

"Thou art our beautiful Eden . . .
Oh, our desert, our little desert."

To the builders, the forlorn hillock was like Eden, a paradise, for it was their native town and was rising phoenix-like from the ashes.

Thus summer went on its way and September came.

Kyrill's hands, bruised and bloodied by the stones he handled, splashed with mortar, never wearied. Dust smeared his forehead and powdered his brows. His dark-blue coat was sprinkled with white, and his beard seemed to be full of grey hairs.

But Andrei saw neither dirt nor tear on Kyrill. The little boy stood high above in the wind holding a pot of gruel covered with a slice of brown bread in his hand.

"Have you brought it?"

"Eat, father."

"Sit down."

Thereupon his attention was again absorbed in the building. Andrei waited a while, then he caught Kyrill by the sleeve and dragged him towards the pot.

"Eat, father."

"Have you no patience, lad?"

"Well, I'm hungry and it's time to be eating."

Kyrill called from the wall :

"Meal-time!"

The songs died down. The shining axes were plunged into the wood. Spoons came forth from leggings. Teeth crunched on crusts. The smell of food and smoke rose on the air.

Sheltered from the wind behind the unfinished wall, Kyrill rinsed his hands and face. Still drying himself, he emerged on to the wall. The wind whisked the towel, which was embroidered with a narrow scarlet edging. Like swans' wings, the ends were lifted aloft into the sky.

He stood for a time gazing down below at the blue waters of the Trubezh, at the Oka, with its abundant stream on which canoes, boats, and other craft were gliding. Some were going from Nizhni-Novgorod to Novgorod-the-Great carrying wares from the Horde to distant Sweden or to German towns. Others floated with the current from Moscow. All docked here. The throng on the wharf was a kaleidoscope of coloured kaftans, cloaks, and gowns. Here the

merchants had built store-houses, inns, and barns, for they had no leisure to dally. Crowding the river were boats blackened with tar and others painted red. Somebody from below was watching Kyrill's towel as it waved in the air, while he stood musing about the great variety of the paths they travelled and the beauty of unseen towns.

What could this hill, this town, mean to him when there were so many wonderful towns in Russia? He had fought for Ryazan, and would now be lying beneath her soil had the Tatar arrows been better aimed.

He had gone forth to fight for Ryazan and for Aniuta. He had fought the Tatars because they encroached on his happiness. But was not his happiness contained in the whole length and breadth of Russia where men spoke the same tongue? Where the same unflagging hands created beauty for the joy of her own people to the amazement of foreign lands?

"Eat, father! It will get cold."

"All right, hand the stuff over."

They sat down on a projection of the wall.

"Did you lock up the house? People pass by. Anyone might wander in."

"I wedged it from the outside with a bit of wood. If anyone comes along he'll see that the master is not at home."

"That's right."

"Look how you have bruised your hands. Is there none but you, father, who can lay the stones?"

"There are many hands. But I always think it is quicker to lay them myself."

"If you go on laying stones too long you will never see the mansion."

"Hold your tongue, boy, nor speak of things beyond your ken. But get this into your head. Some men take ages to build a stone house. There were master-craftsmen such as Klimen and Ivan in Moscow. They concentrated their whole thought on building churches. Perhaps they'd have been happier if they had raised a house or a tower. These they were not given to build. Then there is the painter Zahari, who would have been glad to paint flowers and birds and girls with his magical brush. But who would squander colours for such work? So he painted ikons and poured all the beauty of his soul into them. Again, there is the Frank, Boris. He trekked into Russia and cast bells. The sound of the bells he makes is sweet. He never applies his ear to anything else. He just casts bells and lives by them alone. Such are the times in which we live, child. Revere the epoch in the ikon-painter, the architect of churches, the vibration of bells. We have no other language. That is the medium through which we talk."

From where they sat only the sky was visible. It rested, eternal, on the edge of the white wall. Kyrill, raising his hands, concluded:

"And here am I, so excited, and wanting to give expression to my ideas as fast as possible."

Andrei pondered a moment, then said:

"Living people might be portrayed in an ikon, couldn't they?"

Kyrill looked askance at the lad.

"You are not yet nine and yet you are already speculating on artistry. Take the pot home."

"Let me stay with you for a while, father."

"You want to be alongside us?"

"If you'll allow me to stay."

"Very well. Stay where you are."

"Are you going to lie down for a snooze?"

"No. I'm not inclined for sleep."

Slumber encompassed the town. Work began before dawn, and at midday everyone snoozed for a while.

Kyrill talked to the boy as they strolled about between the walls. But suddenly the words froze upon his lips. Through a breach he could see Oleg's courtyard. A man he had previously known was passing through it on his way to the mansion. Though a black coat covered his uniform, his firm tread betrayed the soldier. As if the weight of his helmet oppressed him, he bent his head towards the earth.

"Grisha ! Surely that must be Grisha Kapustin," exclaimed Kyrill. "What can he have come here for ?"

The soldier disappeared through the doors, and Kyrill's heart fluttered with alarm.

Oleg lay amidst his Turanian rugs, while Bernaba, who was sitting at his feet, said :

"Mamai is khan today. The Horde is strong. Who will be able to conquer it ? It is wiser to be on friendly terms with the Horde and meanwhile to smile upon Moscow."

How clearly he put Oleg's secret thoughts into words !

"The Horde will never overthrow you. Your power is a necessity to it."

"A necessity ?"

"Mamai cannot become Prince of Russia. And when a prince happens to be your friend, why should he injure you ? But Moscow would strangle you and take your place for herself. Are the numbers of princes under her sway so few today ?"

"True enough," thought Oleg, though he did not put his thoughts into words.

"Mamai needs a friend. He will help you. You will become the head of all Russia. . . ."

A page unexpectedly made his appearance, saying with surprise :

"Prince, a messenger has just arrived from Moscow."

"Let him enter."

Hurriedly he swung his legs off the couch and sat up. Bernaba strode to the door. By bending his head Grisha Kapustin just managed to pass into the chamber, so low was the lintel.

"God bless you, Prince Oleg Ivanovich," he said.

"State your business."

"I have been sent on a search."

"And for whom ?"

"We have traced to your domain a murderer and a robber, a slave of the Grand Prince Dmitri Ivanovich. His real name is Kyrill. He is nicknamed The Bearded. He is a stonemason and an architect. He fled from execution. We have been tracking him down for two years now. We have received instructions not to spare this man. This is the purport of my lord Brenko's demand. He begs of you to help him in the matter."

Oleg quietly approached the window and squinted up at the mansion. The walls were already completed and work had begun on the vaulted arches.

It was customary to give up fugitive slaves, but Oleg felt he could not hand over Kyrill. Dmitri's arm did not extend to the lands of Ryazan. Even Bernaba had said that until the time was ripe one had to deal with Moscow in a conciliatory spirit. So he said meekly :

"I will see if it be possible for me to give him into your custody. He is useful to me."

"Useful he may be, but there is more evil than good in him."

"That I shall judge for myself. . . ."

"Forgive me, Prince. . . ."

Oleg became pensive. Dmitri was strong. Mamai was weary after two campaigns and was even now busy destroying his foes. Better allow Dmitri to think that he, Oleg, thought it diplomatic to be on friendly terms with the Grand Prince of Moscow.

"Yes, maybe I shall place him in your custody. It is not as if Prince Dmitri Ivanovich were a Tatar khan. He is one of us. I shall not refuse him his request."

"You will permit me to take him?"

"I shall not hinder you."

"Do you, perchance, wish me to bear a message to Moscow?"

"Here is the message . . . he is a master craftsman . . . Dmitri needs him, and I can always find myself craftsmen."

Bernaba followed Grisha through the doorway and then rushed through the sheds to the barns. There stood Klim, white with flour, taking bread from the peasants.

"Hi!"

"What d'you want?"

"Go as fast as you can to Kyrill, with the utmost speed. He's been sent for from Moscow. Our Prince has given him up."

"Keep an eye on things here. . . ."

Hearing Klim's voice hoarse with alarm, Kyrill looked round. The vaulting of the arch still needed to be finished. But Kyrill's hands dropped to his sides. Still, he had completed the frontage of the mansion. His mates could manage the rest for themselves. Catching up with Klim, he jumped down from the wall.

"Klim, old man, take care of my little one. Give him shelter. I'll hide and come to fetch him later."

"That's settled."

"Oh, father, let me go with you."

"Whither?"

"Anywhere."

"No, son. God be with you."

"Father, do take me."

Klim came to a speedy decision.

"Kyrill, go to my warehouse," said he. "Sit behind my locked door until it is dark. The Prince has given you away. We shall hide you with the Prince's key. Go quickly, ere they come here. My place is full of peasants. You will be lost among them. And as for you, young Andrei, get along home. Take as much stuff as you can carry and make for the wharf. There are all sorts of people there and you'll not be noticed. When it is dark, go to Gostinie as if you were watching the waggons."

Kyrill lay down among the long bins of rye.

When night had fallen, Klim let him out. He led Bernaba's sorrel horse from the stable and took along his own light bay. They crept through the Prince's courtyard and came to the wastes.

"Well, Kyrill, that's the thanks you get from Oleg for your labour and wounds."

A harsh voice broke in from the darkness.

"'Tis not true!"

Klim stepped back, but Kyrill glared into the night. He felt furious. Then Oleg stood before him.

"Have you prepared for a flight, Klim?"

Klim looked at him with venom in his eye. There might be soldiers or guards behind the Prince in the dark.

"You are going away, Kyrill?" asked Oleg in Greek.

"That is clear, is it not, my lord?"

"And who will pay you for your work? My mansion is almost completed."

"I'll not trouble about your debt, Prince."

"But that's not my way of thinking. Here, take this for the journey. On my land your path is free. You yourself must be on the alert and take your chance of escaping the eye of Moscow."

The Prince offered a handful of money to Kyrill, but dropped his hand when he saw his mason turn aside. He glanced at the horses, at Klim's white face and shaking hands which held the reins. Then, with all his strength, he struck Klim with his whip and silently strode away. He had neither weapons nor soldiers with him.

"Ah, the pity of it," burst from Klim. But he pulled himself together and said: "Go quickly, or he will call the guard."

"And you?"

"I can wait."

"How do you know. . . ."

"Listen."

There came the clang of weapons from the darkness. Kyrill leaped on to the horse and led the bay.

Before reaching Gostinie he whistled. Once among the waggons he whistled again. Andrei answered:

"Father?"

"Quick!"

Andrei dragged up a heavy bundle and made as if to set off in the dark.

"Where are you going?"

"There's some more."

"You seem to have brought the whole cottage along with you."

"No, I left the cottage behind. But what's the good of leaving good things behind? Are we princes, or what?"

"Well, give it me quickly."

Kyrill was hard pressed, and hastily he fastened the bundle to the saddle. Andrei reappeared hauling along some more luggage.

"How did you manage to get all that here?"

"I made several journeys for it."

"Well, give it to me and up with you."

"I'm already in the saddle."

"Can you sit a horse safely?"

"As if it were a stove!"

Taking back streets and alleyways, they reached the town gate. The watchmen of the guard stretched their spears across the road and challenged:

"Who goes there?"

"Kyrill the Bearded, architect to the Prince."

"God be with you!"

The cool night air wrapped them about and a light breeze full of fragrance began to blow. They were riding past the meadows.

Kyryll glanced over his shoulder. On the high bank in Ryazan a bonfire had been lighted. The flames shone on the white stone wall of the house.

"The masons have made a fire," said Andrei at a venture.

"They would not have frozen, anyway," answered Kyryll. "They cannot keep quiet. They might just as well have slept, for they have to go to work again at dawn."

He lashed his fiery steed and impetuously rode away.

Chapter XXXII

OLEG VISITS THE HORDE

OLEG WENT TO THE HORDE.

Night found him and his retinue beneath the walls of Sarai. The Ryazanites had pitched their camp in the steppe. A smell of freshly-trampled grass and of horses rose into the air. Now and again the horses' chains jingled and the sentries' weapons clashed each against the others'. A night-bird was calling.

From the dark steppe Oleg looked at brightly-lit Sarai. It was a night towards the end of spring and during the Feast of Ramazan, a month when fast days were strictly observed. Not a drop of water nor a crumb of bread passed anyone's lips. But at night from star-rise to star-set the hungry fasters satisfied their bellies—those at least who had food and drink. On such nights every courtyard was lit with candles, and the market-place, which stayed open for the sale of food, was so brightly illumined that it cast a glow upon the tempting piles of goods. The town, all radiant with the reflection of lights and bonfires, was outstretched beneath the rose-coloured sky as beneath the bedclothes of a prince. A smell of burning oil and meat floated on the breeze; there was a fanfare of trumpets, flutes, and tambourines. Borne through the air now and again came a murmur from the happy throng which enjoyed making a merry uproar.

"What are they doing?" Oleg asked Bernaba.

"They are wrestling, stripped to the waist. Or they are dancing the tightrope between sky and earth. Or perhaps jesters are telling funny stories."

Bernaba had already been at Mamai's court to inform the khan of Oleg's approach, and Mamai had sent two eminent Tatar princes to do the honours.

These Tatar princes looked ruefully at festive Sarai, but concealed from one another their vexation that on such a night of revelry they had to stand decorously behind the guest from Ryazan. Also they concealed from Bernaba their spleen that he had got through, that he had not vanished for ever in the woods of Ryazan, that he had been with the Prince who was about to return in safety to the khan. Further, they concealed their resentment at Mamai's approval of Oleg. Had not he declared:

"It is evident that the Prince bears no malice for what happened to Ryazan. He has protected my servant, is coming here in person, and is bringing gifts. Welcome the Prince of Ryazan with due respect."

Oleg showed his astuteness by taking Bernaba back to Mamai. And Mamai proved himself no less astute when he sent dignitaries of exalted name to meet the Ryazan ruler.

On the following morning Sarai opened its gates to admit Oleg. The streets were packed with people who wished to catch a glimpse of the Russian warriors. But Oleg was not ceremoniously met at the gates, the Prince received no audible

welcome in the streets, none in the Horde paid honour to the great Prince of Ryazan, Oleg Ivanovich, except the two Tatar princes riding silently into the town in front of him.

At the house allotted for his reception a guard had been placed, and Oleg could not decide as to the significance of this : whether it was out of respect and to safeguard him, or whether it was to ensure that he did not secretly leave the precincts. When he proposed to go to church in order to assist at a thanksgiving service for the successful completion of his journey, there was much hemming and hawing : Mamai and the Orthodox bishop would have first to be consulted.

That day the khan was walking in his pleasure-garden where the trees were in flower. He listened again to what the Frank had to tell him. Bernaba said :

"His strength is not great, but his anger against Moscow is great."

"Envy is not anger, but something very different," answered Mamai.

"But envy has inflamed him to anger, even to rage."

"Will he be able to carry out his scheme?" asked Mamai.

"He is too weak. Unaided, he is not strong enough."

"Is there anyone else to display rivalry?"

"Yes. Every enemy of Dmitri is our friend."

"Dmitri assuredly has Russian enemies, too."

"Not a few. He also has foes who are not Russian."

"Who?"

"Is not Olgerd of Lithuania one of Dmitri's foes?"

"He is dead."

"But he has left sons behind him."

"Yesterday it was reported that two of Olgerd's sons had rallied to Dmitri. Dmitri's brother, Vladimir Serpuhov, is married to Olgerd's daughter. Olgerd's nephew, Bobrok, is the husband of Dmitri's sister. They are all close kin, and are all hatched from one nest. Our nest is a different one."

"But Oleg has come into our nest."

"He is weak. Otherwise he would have reminded us how Batu-khan slew his kinsfolk."

"Olgerd has many sons. Which of them have gone to Dmitri?"

"Andrei and Dmitri."

"You have forgotten Jagiello, khan. Jagiello is an enemy of these brothers. And Jagiello is backed by the entire Lithuanian army."

"Oleg can raise twenty thousand men. Jagiello will raise forty thousand. Where shall we find reinforcements? You saw our whole force at Ryazan yourself."

"You have not soldiers, but you have gold. From a myriad battles the Horde has acquired gold. Gold can be transmuted into almost anything—into horses, weapons, and soldiers."

"I noted that you had the Horde in mind while you were in Ryazan."

"My thoughts were for you, khan. The Horde is a foreign land to me. You are—my own father."

This tall, heavy-nosed, round-eyed Genoese was actually inciting the short, puny, bandy-legged Tatar to adopt him as a son. The khan took note of the tender, filial request, offering his slave a coat and a ring. The ring was of gold. This was the first gold to fall into Bernaba's hands. His eyes gleamed at the glitter of gold. He hastened to the house where Oleg was staying :

"My lord, the khan sends you greeting. He is fasting for the moment. When the fast is over, he will summon you to speak with him,"

Frowning, Oleg considered the situation. There was still a week of fasting to get through. He would have, therefore, to wait a week. But the khan was the khan, while Oleg was merely the Prince of devastated Ryazan.

"Thank the khan for his kindness. I shall wait."

Bernaba reflected: "You will wait as long as we want you to." He made no effort now to conceal the fact that he had given his allegiance once more to the khan.

"My khan inquires, Oleg Ivanovich, whether you are satisfied with your food, your servants, and your quarters."

"Here is a little gift for you, Bernaba, out of my poverty. You are not a stranger. Be my friend."

And one more ring was looped round Bernaba's finger.

He went back to Mamai, who asked him:

"On whom shall we pour our gold?"

"In the mountains there are the Yasi; on the steppes, the Circassians; in the desert, Tourmenians; in Kaffa, the Genoese; and in many places round about there are tribes and peoples eager for gold, for treasure, for loot. If we tell them about it, promise it to them, and give it to them, they will rally."

"Do they wish to die?"

"Each hopes that the arrows will strike his neighbour's breast."

"And what if their own breast be pierced?"

"The larger will be our portion. Dead men do not ask for pay."

Fasting is no obstacle to work. Skilled carpenters were erecting new pillars before the khan's house. Tall pillars carved by the skilful chisels of master craftsmen from Bokhara. Gardeners were putting the gardens to rights. They were engaged in transplanting rose-bushes in flower so that they would be nearer to the house. The blossoms might be doomed to wither away, but not before Oleg had walked past them. Were things to happen otherwise, the gardeners might unaccountably wither away! Mamai was preparing the house, as carpets are woven, closely interweaving thread with thread to create beautiful patterns. The khan was well aware that Oleg was learned, clever, and proud. He wished to display before his guest his own pride fulfilled, to hide beneath this veil his greedy, hungry heart, which could only be satiated with one thing—Moscow.

Oleg entered the garden. They talked as if the ashes of Ryazan did not lie between them, as if Ryazan cattle were not grazing on the steppes of the Horde, as if the Tatar warriors were not enriching themselves at the expense of their newly-acquired slaves.

"Now," said Oleg, "I know that Dmitri is your enemy just as he is mine."

But Mamai merely listened. Let the Prince himself make an offer. It was not for Mamai to call for assistance.

"It is better both for you and for me to join forces and break him."

"Is he strong?"

"Yes, but we shall not be weak. We will appeal to Jagiello of Lithuania. We shall divide Russia between us. I shall have Moscow, Suzdal, Novgorod. Jagiello will get Smolensk and Pskov. We shall pay you tribute as of old in the days of Batu."

"How much do you propose to collect?"

"What shall we not collect? Russia is a great land. Dmitri's household is strong. Are our hands less cunning than Dmitri's? He bargained you into ceding him a reduction, and see how wealthy he has become on that. But for your leniency the gold would have come to you."

"I'm not so sure of that. Why should I want Moscow? I have gold enough already."

"But who can tell whether Dmitri will not find some way of depriving you of your gold?"

Mamai scowled. He bit his lips and clenched his fist. Then, recovering composure, he said quietly:

"Not that! Well, Prince, make your preparations. We shall see."

"I shall get ready."

"That's right! Get ready speedily."

Mamai not only accepted gifts from Oleg, but himself gave him presents.

"He must not leave the Horde feeling stinted."

Oleg was already sailing up the Volga on his way back to Ryazan when in Sarai a new guest was being received.

Chapter XXXIII

THE METROPOLITAN

ON TUESDAY, JULY 26, 1379, THE ACTING METROPOLITAN OF ALL RUSSIA, MIHAIL Mitiai, crossed the Oka on his way to Constantinople to be consecrated by Nil, the Oecumenical Patriarch.

As the gaily-painted boat drifted away from the shore, the Metropolitan gazed at the lofty bank on which stood the town of Kolomna. Assembled on the bank to see him off were Grand Prince Dmitri, the senior boyars, and the bishops. The latter's vestments shone with gold, and golden, too, were the ikons they held in their hands. Banners gleamed aloft. The bells of the city pealed. There on the hill-top were the towers and churches of Mitiai's native town of Kolomna.

The Metropolitan blessed them with an all-embracing sweep of his arm. He was a tall man with wide cheekbones, and as he looked back it seemed as though the bank were receding from him. Suddenly a flock of white pigeons flew out of the dark towers and circled among the white clouds.

Was it so long a time since he had tried to catch pigeons at this very spot above the roofs of the timbered mansions? As then, so now, red and grey linen was drying on poles in the suburb and similar peasant women stood on the wharves. But then he had not been the cynosure of all eyes. Today, Dmitri himself, the Grand Prince, had kissed his cheeks thrice; the great boyar, Yuri Vasilievich Kochevin-Oleshinski, had headed Mitiai's guard of honour. Three archimandrites, six of the Metropolitan's boyars, the Moscow archpriest, Alexander, abbots, translators, innumerable servitors, many carts laden with treasure and vestments, were accompanying Mitiai to Constantinople.

Besides all this, Mitiai was taking two sheets of white vellum to which Dmitri's seals were affixed. Thus in case of need he could write whatever he pleased in Dmitri's name.

No Metropolitan had ever been accorded such honours. But Dmitri, when he sent Mitiai on this mission, wanted everyone to realize that he had quite definitely made up his mind and that Nil, the Oecumenical Patriarch at Constantinople, should be given proof of the decision made by Dmitri, Grand Prince of Moscow and of All Russia.

Such unwonted honour made Mitiai raise his head even higher than usual.

He looked at the pigeons as he blessed Kolomna and its river bank. It seemed to him that he saw an invisible light in the sky and that God Himself likewise blessed the Muscovite land through the instrumentality of Mitiai's hand. His face was radiant and tears streamed from his eyes.

"I dedicate my life to you pigeons of Moscow!"

Some weeks later, when Mitiai and his retinue were beyond the boundaries of Ryazan country and in the grassy expanse of the ancient Polovtsian steppes, the Tatars stopped the Metropolitan.

"Khan Mamai's nephew, Tiuliubek, is ill. The khan begs that you pray for Tiuliubek."

"By the grace of my God, Mamai became khan. By the grace of God, too, Tiuliubek will rise hale from his bed. Take me to him and I shall pray for him."

Mamai was awaiting Mitiai's advent in Sarai. The Metropolitan's assured answer had angered the khan. In the evening Mamai had a talk with Bernaba. But Bernaba held aloof, saying:

"Did the Horde bestow on Moscow the right to collect tribute for the Horde from all over Russia?"

"Yes, it was bestowed on Ivan Kalita, Grand Prince of Moscow."

"And he became wealthy from it. As soon as he grew rich, he waxed strong, gave you too little money while taking extra from the princes. With that money he forged himself swords, and the princes beneath him grew weak. Armed with his swords and with the power he wielded over the lesser princes, who were thus enfeebled, he came in strength against us. Is this true?"

"Yes."

"And now Prince Dmitri has set up a Metropolitan of his own choosing in Moscow. The Russian priests have likewise fallen under Moscow's sway. All the churches and monasteries have submitted also. The Grand Prince of Moscow not only rules this life here below but life beyond the grave as well."

"Who told you that?"

"Oleg of Ryazan."

"He speaks nothing but the truth."

"He also said: 'Dmitri installed Mitiai without consulting the Patriarch. Understand that Dmitri and Mitiai are hand in glove.'"

"Even their names are similar: 'Mitia and Mitiai'."

"Mitiai's Christian name is Mihail—but that is not the point—"

He was interrupted by a burst of ringing from all the church bells in Sarai. Mitiai had entered the town. He was met by Ivan, Russian Bishop of Sarai, and in company with his gilded suite he rode past Mamai's gardens to the Orthodox Church where a service was to be held.

"As though he were at home in Moscow," said Bernaba, shrugging his shoulders.

To which Mamai replied:

"Ghenghis commanded us to respect priests. They hold all Russia in their hands. It is possible to stir up enmity among the princes, but the priests form one solid band, obeying but one power, and it is wiser to be on the right side of that power. An enemy is invincible so long as he is united."

"But Mitiai and Dmitri are as one hand. Dmitri would not come here today; but Mitiai is here."

"Do you suggest that the strength of this hand be riven in twain?"

"Perchance by even more than half."

"Who will do such a thing?"

"I."

Mamai made up his mind.

Arrayed in robes of velvet interwoven with threads of gold, in snow-white turbans, gilded weapons girded round them, the Tatar princes who were friends of Mamai met Mitiai as he emerged from the portals of the cathedral.

"The khan awaits you, Your Grace."

"My blessing be upon the khan, his ladies, his sons . . ."

"God has sent no son to the khan."

"I shall invoke Our Lord on his behalf."

Bowing their thanks, they issued an invitation :

"Follow us."

The procession moved through the whole of Sarai. In front went the most eminent princes of the khanate ; behind came Mitiai, while Dmitri's boyars and the highest dignitaries of the Muscovite clergy brought up the rear. The gate of the khan's enclosure was flung wide, the courtyard was spread with rugs. In the gardens the roses were in bloom, the fountains played, and the goldfish disported themselves in the blue waters.

The Metropolitan was clad from neck to feet in black, his head bowed beneath the weight of his white mitre. He stepped over the gaily-coloured carpets between rows of servitors and soldiers dressed in multi-hued garments.

In a lofty chamber, ornamented from floor to ceiling, Mamai sat on a throne wrought in gold, ready to receive his guest.

Mitiai came to a halt and blessed the khan. The khan inclined his head in respectful acknowledgment. Everyone present witnessed this.

The puny khan, fingering a chaplet of beads with weak fingers, screwed up his dim-sighted eyes as he looked at this tall, broad-shouldered, haughty, and handsome man who had abjured mundane beauty and joy.

"The little boy is ill," said the khan.

"I pray continually that his health may be restored," answered Mitiai.

"Thank you."

Mitiai paid a visit to the ailing lad, Tiuliubek. His eyes were inflamed and swollen, the lids were stuck together with pus and grey ointment, so that he could not see at all. The Horde leeches saw to it that not a drop of moisture should touch those infected eyes.

Mitiai, after saying some prayers over the sick lad, sprinkled holy water upon his face, carefully wiping away the pus and ointment. Then Tiuliubek saw above him the unknown, severe countenance of the Russian Mitiai.

The Metropolitan left water with the sufferer and ordered that Tiuliubek's eyes be bathed with it.

Four days later Mitiai rode forth from the town taking the road to Kaffa. There he would look upon the sea for the first time in his life and board the ship which was to sail for Byzantium.

As a sign of his recovery Tiuliubek wrote a personal letter to Mitiai. In this epistle he informed the Metropolitan that the khan, in accordance with the tradition of his ancestors, had freed all the servants of the Orthodox Church from paying tribute to the Horde in order that the before-mentioned Metropolitan Mihail Mitiai might pray to God for the khan.

The princes of the Horde rode forth with Mitiai to accompany him through the whole length of the Tatar lands. And with them went Bernaba.

Bernaba was at pains to make it clear that he was accompanying the Tatar princes, who in their turn endeavoured to make believe that the Genoese came in the capacity of interpreter. But each of them knew in his heart that the eye

of the all-powerful Mamai kept vigilant watch over everything. The eye itself was Bernaba.

Mitiai alone was pleased to converse with Bernaba. The Genoese's talk was carried on in Greek, and this delighted the Metropolitan, for thus he was enabled to try out his own pronunciation of that language. Bernaba followed Mitiai closely, reading aloud to him the works of Homer and Khayyám. This sufficed to make the learned and well-read Mitiai enjoy his encounters with Bernaba.

The two men's horses stepped sprightly over the steppe along the coast, their tails spreading in the wind. The feathery grass bent before the breeze. Large birds settled to rest on the distant burial-grounds. Women carved in stone kept vigil on the tumuli. Mitiai looked sternly at the grey idols hewn by heathen hands:

"What an abomination!"

But the women stood unmoved, clutching their flat pitchers to their midriffs. There was no trace of the hoofs which had trodden this undying earth, and the voice of the tribes that had struggled and wandered here was no longer to be heard. Or maybe the voice still lingered in a lonesome melody, mournfully sung far beyond the grey grasses.

Mitiai marvelled at the vast expanse of the level plain, wondered at the silent homage rendered him by the Tatars who accompanied him. He never guessed that these princes were riding to Kaffa in order to hire Genoese troops, the famous Black Infantry. If it proved possible they intended to strike a bargain with the Yasi and many others—indeed, with any who wished to load Moscow gold into their own coffers.

In search of fresh forces, in the hope of battles renewed, the horsemen of the Horde, whose martial spirit had been somewhat curbed, sped forward. Unsubdued passion urged them on through the windswept, limitless steppe. Bernaba craved for gold. He longed to place it in a strong pouch and to thrust that pouch into his own saddle-bag. He saw himself seated firmly on his horse, riding to Kaffa and on to the wharf, where he would board a tarred Genoese ship. Then to hoist sail when an east wind was blowing so that the east might be left in the wake of the stern, so that he might forget the east in the balmy atmosphere of the Mediterranean and the white stones on its green shores, so that the memory of the life he had spent in the east might remain with him only as a dim and distant song. He speeded up his horse as if the heavy pouch had already been stowed away in his saddle-bag. His strength hardly sufficed to restrain his mount and not overtake Mitiai's caravan, which had come to a standstill awaiting the arrival of the lumbering baggage train.

Bernaba talked with Mitiai until his lips were parched. It never crossed the Metropolitan's mind that Bernaba had been ordered by Mamai to accompany him until he was far, far away.

In this wise they reached the town of Kaffa, which the Greeks called Theodosia.

The dark cypresses and the blue mountains of the Crimea towered heavenward into the azure sky. Stony paths wound through the bluish grass. Before them spread the wide expanse of the Black Sea, flecked with shimmering patterns of silver. Here a Genoese ship was hired for Mitiai, and in this negotiation Bernaba lent an eager hand. The Metropolitan's treasure, his troops, and his companions were hauled aboard. The Metropolitan himself with a small guard spent the night in the town.

He was shown walls running up and down hills, square towers constructed of huge grey slabs of stone, a palace faced with red stone, a Roman Catholic

church with a spire and, high aloft, a rose window. He was filled with amazement at the people's short-skirted garments and their narrow trousers.

"Disgraceful!"

On dismissing Bernaba he gave the Genoese a ring and also silver coins from Moscow. They were as tiny as fishes' scales, bearing the picture of a horseman piercing a dragon with his spear.

"Why, it's our St. George," cried Bernaba. "We are of one faith, and I should deem it a great honour to receive baptism at your hand and to enter the Orthodox fold, Your Grace."

"This does not merely represent St. George," said Mitiai firmly. "It is also Russia stabbing the beast of the Horde with her spear."

Mitiai likewise gave bounty to the Tatar princes who had accompanied him to Kaffa and spoke graciously to them.

The Metropolitan slept, expecting to set sail on the morrow. But Bernaba ran along the little narrow street leaping from cobble to cobble down to the wharf. His arrival was obviously expected. A Genoese, wearing a silken scarf and tanned by exposure to the sea winds, was about to set sail for distant parts in Mitiai's ship.

"Is all in readiness?" inquired Bernaba.

"One leg is there already," replied the seaman.

"Then get the second one aboard at once."

He drew forth a purse, a small green velvet bag, and thrust his fingers into it. But the bag merely jingled and he failed to grasp what he wanted. So he poured the contents into his palm, and from beneath the shining scales he extracted a little packet.

"This is a dependable poison, like *aqua tofana*."

He reflected for a moment and then caught up a small coin with his nail and proffered it to the sailor. Again he lapsed into thought, touched another ruble with his nail, but thought better of it and put the coin back into the pouch.

"When you return, and everything is all right, I shall give you more. A lot more."

"How much?"

Bernaba glanced down at his palm. Three coins were still left in it.

"Three."

"Make sure of it."

"That is what your reward will be: three."

"Good."

"And do not hurry. The farther you get from here, the better for you."

"I understand."

Without haste, Bernaba strolled into the town, where his native tongue smote his ears on all sides. Also there were the sounds of song and of women's voices.

"Where can I find one to my liking? The women here are so obnoxious. Higher up they seem to be better-looking."

He hastened his steps.

Next morning, from the elevation where he stood, he saw Mitiai's ship hoist a parti-coloured sail. It drove before the wind, heeling over. But the experienced helmsman tacked her out of the breakers and into the open sea. Without haste the ship glided along the stony shores of the Crimea making for the west.

"When will my time come to sail away like that?"

With determined gait he made his way along an alley as narrow as those in Genoa, to the house where Mamai's envoys were staying.

Chapter XXXIV

UNDER THE SIGN OF THE HORSE'S SKULL

BEFORE VENTURING INTO THE CLEARING, KYRILL AND ANDREI HALTED IN THE scrub and looked around.

As on his first visit, Kyrill saw the horse's skull gleaming white above the hut. The blue smoke spiralled peacefully upward from the fire into the azure of the autumn sky, and gathered round the blaze were Schap and Timoshei with the bear. Old Mikeisha was wandering among the beehives collecting honey in a bucket.

It seemed to Kyrill that the old man had shrunk and was even more bent than when last he had been with him. His legs spread wider apart as he ambled around. But his rugged head was held high as he gazed up at the sky. His huge head appeared as large as his whole body.

"Who is that?" whispered Andrei.

"You don't need to be afraid of him, but of that one sitting by the fire. The man with the pointed beard."

"Why?"

"Because he does not yet know himself what he is seeking for on this earth. But the old man has found what he wants."

"Do you know everybody?"

"Everyone here, anyway."

Kyrill whistled, and on the instant Timoshei jumped over the fire past Schap and hid in the bushes. Toptyga was no less impetuous. But Schap turned quietly towards the new arrivals and with the same imperturbability Mikeisha issued from among the trees.

"It is long since I have awaited your coming," said the old man, laying his hand on Kyrill's heart.

Thus life in the forest began once more.

Schap said to Kyrill:

"Look here, Kyrill, I've eaten your broth. Why not sit down and try some of mine?"

"You've only to treat me to it! But first of all call Timoshei or he'll pine away there without his food. He's a very shy bird. Timoshei!"

"Here I am."

"Why do you hide?"

"Where's Grandad Mikeisha?"

"I'm coming."

"Is that boy yours?" asked the old man.

"My son."

"Ah, I see."

So they all squatted round the fire, and the gruel, permeated by the resin-laden wind, was toothsome and excellent.

No one questioned Kyrill, for they knew that in his own good time he would tell them all they should know, and if there was something they were not meant to know, then why question him? He would not tell them in any case. For here above them all hung the bleached skull—a chamber of bone. Chamber, little chamber, who lives within thy walls? Under this sign there lived those only who knew how to keep a silent tongue in their heads.

After they had eaten their fill they continued to sit leisurely round the fire

chatting to one another, while through the transparent smoke their motionless figures quivered as if reflected in a clear brook.

Their life was an uneventful one. People came and went from time to time. Some brought supplies of food and others wares. The old man who had nothing further to demand of life faithfully guarded these goods.

Andrei did not lag behind the old man in his care of the beehives. "Honey differs very much," the old man instructed him. "Some years we manage to find wild honey. And what honey it is, indeed! As pure and clear as a tear. You place a bowl beneath it and it flows out of the combs. But if the comb is holed or cut, the honey is not so clear. All the same it is better than when the bees have to be smoked out. You and I will go into the forest, find a swarm and smoke it out. Though the honey will be grey in colour and have bits of wax in it, it will still have a flavour all its own. Sometimes it is so strong as to take the breath away. It depends on the flower from which the bees have gathered the nectar. If the nectar comes from buckthorn, the honey is granular and thick. If it is from buckwheat, it is red—you can tell it by the colour. Once I tasted some from Kazan. It had been garnered from the nectar of lime flowers and was as if perfumed with incense or oil. It was both scented and limpid, sweeter by far than that gathered from annual crops and more fragrant than wild honey."

Andrei helped the old man to smoke out hives, ran for buckets, sharpened the knife.

"Honey is good for the wise," said the old man, "but spells ruin to the restless. I used to be skilled in steaming honey. You mix it with water, put scented herbs into it, seal it up in an earthen jar and place it on the stove for some time. Occasionally it will be boiled so much that the lid cracks. Then again it can be stewed with fruit—blackcurrants and rowanberries. Made into raspberry preserve it is also good. That sort of honey makes life sweeter. True is the adage: 'With honey you swallow gold and eat up misfortune.'"

"Is it good for the health?"

"Very good, if you are not prone to melancholy."

The bees swarmed about them, but they worked so quietly that not one pricked them with its barbed sting. Occasionally they became entangled in the hair. Then the old man would carefully free them and let them fly away. With a buzz they started off to repay this kindness, though it were with but a single drop of honey.

Mikeisha continued to unfold his bee-lore.

"The drop the bee carries is so small it is invisible to the eye, incomprehensible to the mind. Yet we draw a full pitcher of honey, so abundantly have the bees gathered it in. Thus it is with the affairs of men. The work of each is invisible and incomprehensible. Yet each man carries his drop. Love your motherland, boy. On a day to come I shall tell you my own story, and you will see me as I am. But you are too young just now to understand everything."

One morning Schap beckoned Timoshei, and, leaving the bear tied to the stump of a tree, they made for Pronsk, brushing the early dew away as they strode along.

Several days passed. Kyrill set about digging so as to make an earthen hut for the winter. Andrei was questioning the old man:

"Have you ever seen a werewolf?"

"How can they be distinguished? They have no special marks."

"Do you know how one changes into a werewolf?"

"In the very middle of the forest you must find a bare stump from which all

the bark has fallen—and such do exist. Then you must thrust a knife into the stump and turn a somersault over it. After that you become a werewolf. For a time you'll run about in the shape of a wolf. When you want to become a human being again you will have to go back to the stump and, as soon as you see the knife, run round to the other side and jump over the stump and you'll be a human being. But if, God forbid, someone, seeing the knife, takes it away while you are running about and you come along and find no knife . . . that's a misfortune, for you will remain a werewolf for the rest of your life. There's the whole story for you."

"Have you ever tried it?"

"Why should I? All my life I have run about like a wolf. All my life the authorities have dogged my heels. Here, in this place alone, have I found peace. This is the peace of the forest and of the wolves."

"What did you do, grandad?"

Mikeisha looked sternly at Andrei as he answered:

"You are too young to understand yet."

On a sudden a cry issued from the forest. Both fell silent, keyed up with expectation. Timoshei, his face pale and his clothing torn, broke from the bushes.

"Oh, lord!"

"What is it?"

"Oh, lord, they are dragging Schap here."

"Who are?"

"The men of our band."

"Are they far off?"

"They may be here any minute now."

"What's the matter with him?"

"A Tatar caravan was on its way to Pronsk. We made for it, but the men had swords and attacked us. They wounded Schap in a clearing."

"And the Tatars?"

"They fled. The whole train of waggons is ours."

"Is your band a big one?"

"Schap doesn't care for large numbers. There are five of us. One stayed behind. One was wounded like Schap. Three are carrying them here."

"And why did you run on ahead?"

"To bring you the news."

"What news?"

"Oh, it's terrible over there."

"What is?"

"Everything."

Mikeisha called Kyrill.

"Go and meet them, Kyrill. Three cannot possibly carry two."

"I'll go at once."

He disappeared into the darkness of the trees, listening to every crackle and every rustle. More than once the elks led him astray. At length he heard the sound of falling wood.

He helped the men to get the wounded as far as the beehives. The old man ordered them to lay down the casualties. He drove everyone away so as to be completely by himself. He boiled certain roots, bathed the wounds with the decoction, placed a hornets' nest on the gaping cuts, and sprinkled them with ashes.

The cut on Schap's head and the slash across his face began to close up. He was slowly recovering.

"The blood will return. Lie still. Expose your wound to the wind and let it blow freely on it. Take this honey."

"It is bitter."

"It's not ordinary honey. Drink."

The haul proved a splendid one. There were thick carpets, Chinese flowered silks, blue silk embroidered with long-tailed silver birds, sword-hilts of silver damascened in black, scabbards inlaid with precious stones, saddles painted with scarlet blossoms on green lacquer, saddles inlaid with silver, silver cups chased with incomprehensible inscriptions. Mikeisha turned one of these over and over in his hands.

"This," he said, "is what is written here: 'In olden times there were days and nights and stars in the sky just as now. Today as we walk we tread on the dust of adulterers who lived long before we were born.'"

"Are you really able to read and write?"

"I have not been taught Russian, but I understand Shemakhan. I went through a lot while I was in the Horde."

"It is truly written," said Kyrill reflectively.

One of the band was doubtful.

"How can it be true? It is not a manuscript, but some sort of a chased wriggly wormlike thing." The speaker rose to his feet. "The Tatar cannot possess the truth. The truth? But they are villainous. What kind of truth can they know of?"

"No Tatar ever inscribed these words," said the old man. "These are not their words."

"Where should they get words from?" began Timoshei. "They do not even understand Russian. Yet our Russian speech is simple enough."

"You're a bonny fighter, Timoshei," said the same man. "You rushed at the merchants as if sparks flashed from your heels, and then suddenly, in the very thick of the fray, you hid among the waggons, hid in some sacking and lay very quiet."

"Yes, but it was terrible when I cut off his head."

"If you'd not cut his off, he'd have cut off yours."

"But he did not touch me."

"And had it not been for those Tatars we should be living by our own labour in a town. There would be work for us all. But today the towns have grown poor, trades have come to an end, some places even have been made a desert. Where can we find pity for them in our hearts if they have no pity for us?"

Then the old man looked at them all and sternly asked Schap:

"How are you going to divide up the spoil?"

"Equally among us all. We shall spread it out, and meanwhile you will keep watch and ward over it. If one of us should fall out you will bestow his share as he would have wished. And each of us will tell you secretly what he wishes."

"I shall do as you suggest."

"We shall have to go to Dubok for grain."

"We must store it for the winter."

Mikeisha pacified him:

"We can fetch it quite as well when the snows have come. For the time being we have sufficient for our needs in store."

The evening drew on. Kyrill lay supine among the bushes gazing up at the sky and reviewing his life. He had slaked his passion and people had recoiled from him. To save his own skin he had killed and now he was an outcast in

the forest. Yet when he had fought for Ryazan the Ryazanites had accepted him as one of themselves. The Prince had betrayed him into the hands of the law, but even that action was concealed from the people. Could he perform a feat or a deed which would sunder the heavy chain from off him? Casting his mind back into the past, he asked himself whether the good he had done had ever been repaid with good. What else must he do to cleanse himself from the evil that was in him? Murderers, thieves, the scum of the earth had accepted him into their midst because he had done them a good turn, had saved the life of an old man, or because he himself was branded with the murder of a villain.

His thoughts floated like clouds, changing their contours, and at times being completely absorbed into the sky.

The old man and Schap went away towards the east, which was darkened by the gloaming. They knelt side by side, and the old man said:

"I swear to you that I shall keep your goods as intact as my strength and understanding permit. I shall give them to no one against your will, nor shall I allow myself to be tempted to touch them. Should you die prematurely I shall not conceal their whereabouts from your mates."

He bent forward and kissed the ground. Schap, too, vowed to remain grateful to the old man, and he, too, bent down and kissed the earth. Thus they sealed a terrible and indissoluble vow, for a man can be forsaken of all, but the earth will never abandon him. From Mother Earth he came and to her will he return.

Chapter XXXV

THE RIVER TSNA

THE AUTUMN FOG WAS WARM AND THE LIGHT WET LEAVES LAY THICK ON THE forest tracks. A brilliantly coated red fox slunk across the road, then stopped to sniff.

Dmitri rode through the woods accompanied by Brenko, Vnuk, Tiuchev, some pages and a small detachment of militia.

The quietly flowing Tsna shone through the trees, and as soon as Dmitri appeared the bells were rung on the hill.

With ikons, priests, and banners, the people came across the meadows from Liubutsk. Hurrying through the fields, where ricks of oats and piles of rye had not yet been gathered in, were women in red and blue sarafans and peasants in long white shirts or sleeveless coats. As Dmitri looked at the procession he thought that Russian clothing was drab and lacked vividness of colour. Maybe this was due to the fog, or it might be that the dyes were poor. He felt well and at peace because the day was warm and overcast, the people's apparel so subdued in hue, the sound of the bells so gentle.

Dmitri and his companions dismounted when the head of the procession reached them. Everyone came to a halt in the middle of the field. The acolytes ranged the ikons in a semicircle. The priests came forward and started to chant.

Fumes of incense evaporated into the mist. The wind did not blow out the candles, the bells did not cease to peal forth. During the whole of the service Dmitri stood erect in the sharp stubble. He was wrapped in a red cloak. Then a shower of holy water from the sprinkler splashed his face and he began to pray earnestly for a while before approaching the cross.

The priest did not give him the cross to kiss until after he had spoken a few words of welcome.

"The town of Liubutsk," he said, "is glad the Lord Dmitri Ivanovich has not forgotten his servants, has condescended to sit in the judgment seat of the parish of Tsna to hear the needs and the sorrows of the town of Liubutsk."

While the priest spoke, Dmitri gazed over his head. Cranes were calling from the sky. They seemed to have flocked together for the autumn flight. The fog hid them, and only their voices floated down from high on the fog-bank. Suddenly both the cranes' voices and the sound of the bells were silenced at the mention of Oleg's name. Dmitri stared straight into the priest's beard.

"A year has passed since the haughty Oleg of Ryazan came to seek safety from the Tatars in the town of Liubutsk. And protection was given him because the people of Liubutsk remembered that Russian blood, the blood of Sviatoslav of Chernigov of the true faith, ran in his veins. But the strength of the town lies in thee, my lord, in thee. Our town rallies to thee. Thou art our protector, thou art our strength . . ."

"This must be the priest who wrote me that letter," thought Dmitri.

He kissed the ikon and bowed to the people. Then the priests wheeled and the people, carrying the ikons on their shoulders, followed them slowly towards the town. Dmitri rode behind the ikons with his retinue in his wake, while the rear was brought up by the inhabitants of Liubutsk. Then came the herds belonging to the people of Liubutsk. They were returning from the pastures—cows, silent and weary, sad but noisy sheep, and the herdsman leaning on his long crook.

Dmitri rode into Liubutsk, rode past the closely-packed rows of cottages, rode up to the parish church settlement. The house where the overseer usually lived had been heated for the Prince's reception. After the damp of the forest it was pleasant to get into the dry heat of the room. Dmitri's court and companions were distributed over the whole settlement, while the militia was billeted in the town.

Darkness descended and the lamps were lit. The overseer busied himself about the supper.

"Do not judge me too severely, my lord. We know not the art of cooking delicacies. We've made you a fish soup."

Dmitri looked quizzically at the overseer.

"You knew, you cunning old fox, just the dish which would please your Prince."

"Yes, I have heard that you were partial to fish soup."

The steam from the soup rose as high as the ceiling, filling the air with the smell of boiled onions. A dish of small sturgeon was brought in and Dmitri partook of the fish and supped the soup.

After a while Brenko and Tiuchev joined Dmitri. Also there came the Prince's secretary, Vnuk, with the clerks, scribes, and other servitors, who all took their places in the priest's house and tasted the fare provided by his wife.

When the meal was finished and the table cleared, Sofroni asked to see Dmitri.

"How is it that you are here?"

"I have come here for my family. They fled hither from Ryazan and would not go on to Moscow with me."

"And during your stay in Moscow were you provided with everything you needed?"

"With everything. I was lodged at the ambassador's."

"That is the right place for you."

"Might I venture to ask whether I could be entrusted with writing up the Chronicles? Whether I could be put in charge of the Chronicle books?"

"Are you accustomed to such work?"

"I am indeed! I wrote while I was in Ryazan, but it would not be seemly to write for Ryazan while looking at events with Muscovite eyes."

"Are you a Muscovite?"

"I am wholeheartedly with you, Prince."

"To write the Chronicles one must have a liberal mind. For the mind is like a cornbin—sometimes a bin may be filled with wheat to the brim, at others only a few grains may be left in the corners, and those beginning to germinate. One steward will be liberal in his control of the full bin, drawing therefrom in full measure; another will stint and be in fear of losing a single grain, and though his bins be full, the grain will deteriorate, grow rank and have a mousy smell. If you turn it over steam will rise. Do you take my meaning?"

"My lord, the parable is true."

"Go, father, and see Vnuk. Although he has but recently become my secretary, he is a wise man and will of a certainty find work for you to do. Tell him that you came on my recommendation."

The fish soup had put Dmitri in a good humour.

But Brenko interpolated cautiously:

"Is it not rather premature to allow a Ryazanite to study Muscovite records? Would it not be better to give him a trial in some other occupation first?"

"You are thinking that the eye of Ryazan is among us. So be it! This is what makes Oleg quake. He will buy for a mite, but for a ruble he will add boast to boast. Moscow no longer has anything to hide. If this supposed eye takes a look behind the hedge, it will see that Moscow is stronger than appears on the surface. Should we conceal such a fact? We do not respect the Tatars nor do we hide this from them. We gave them a taste of our mettle on the banks of the Vozha. Do not worry about Ryazan's eye. Let it spy. They may grow humbler."

"Well, if that is how you feel, let your will be done."

Brenko fell asleep, lulled by the sterlets of the Oka and the heat within the cottage. The overseer pushed him gently aside so as to make up a proper bed beneath him. The whole party settled down on the broad white benches and were impervious to cocks crowing in the fog-drenched night or to the sound of the shepherds' birchen pipes when they played at dawn.

When Dmitri awoke he at once jumped to his feet. The pages, knowing his habits, held a ewer of icy-cold water in readiness. Dmitri washed, and his face glowed red. Then he went out on to the steps of the porch to watch the flaming dawn.

The people who were to be judged at the Prince's court were already assembled in the yard. Some were lazily chewing as they sat leaning against the wall. In their surprise at seeing the Prince so early afoot the food stuck in their gizzards; all sprang to their feet and bowed to the ground. Here was Dmitri, alone and without ceremony of any sort.

"Enough of this bowing and scraping," he cried angrily. "If I have to pronounce sentence upon you, then will be the time to bend your backs. But now sit down and eat so that you will not stand before your Prince with empty bellies. I have no liking for that kind of thing, it makes a man timid. A Muscovite must put timidity behind him and forget all about it."

He slammed the door as he made his retreat.

"Just like him," said one of Dmitri's soldiers. "Talk to him as if you yourself were the Prince. Then he'll listen to you. He sets a high value on his people."

"Is he merciful?"

"To the guilty?"

"Well, let us suppose you to be a trifle guilty."

"In such a case you'd better be on your guard."

"Ah!"

"What have you been guilty of?"

"God forgive me, but it was not I."

"Who was it if not yourself?"

"How should you know whether I'm the guilty party?"

"It's not hard to see through a man such as you."

"Oh, lord! Will he condemn me?"

"Most certainly."

"Oh, lord! Then I'll tell him everything. Let him act as it pleases him—as if I were going to confession. Maybe then he'll relent?"

"Definitely."

The moment the law court had assembled Dmitri took his seat on the steps; in the yard sat his boyars, the guard stood round, the examination began. The Prince listened in silence, objectively, seeking for truth and for reasons for clemency. The plaintiffs and the accused addressed themselves over the heads of the boyars towards the steps. And Dmitri listened, not interfering in the trial by so much as a word.

Two cases of disputed partition were heard. Now they were dealing with a case of damage to crops caused by cattle. The plaintiff was a young peasant who had come from Ryazan territory and settled in the parish.

"The people here wrong me. If there is a tax or a burden I am made to bear it out of my proper turn. And Esei, there, covets my field. Yet it is I who have worked that field so that it is today like a good feather-bed to me. He tried to persuade me to give it up. 'Give it up, give it up,' says he, 'for I am a native of these parts, whereas you come from Ryazan. The wind blew you hither.'—'No,' say I, 'I refuse to give it up. Dig some land like that for yourself if you have the strength.' He broke down my fence and let in his sheep on my crop of oats. I had done him no harm, so why did he play such a scurvy trick on me?"

Esei was he who had been talking to the soldier. He flew into a rage and made a dash for the judge's table.

"Did he see me breaking into his garden?" Then his glance flashed over the stairway, and casting down his eyes he added quietly: "The whole thing vexed me, so I broke his fence down."

For the first time Dmitri broke his silence to ask:

"What was it that annoyed you?"

All faces were turned in his direction. Esei kept still for a moment, and then said:

"In a word—I am guilty. Have mercy on me, my lord."

Dmitri questioned the Ryazanite:

"Have you been here long?"

"Three years."

"I free you from all tribute and labour in behalf of your overlord for three years. Get to your feet. Why are you staring at the overseer? Has he done you a wrong? Reckon the amount of damage, and Esei will pay you in full and at once. He has been here a long time so he will find the money all right. And

because he bears malice and breaks down other persons' fences he shall feel the lash, so that in future he may remember that all my children are dear to me, those that have grown to manhood and the newly born, those who have always been here and those who have recently arrived. Thus is the case decided."

The soldier rushed fervently up to Esei and dragged him away, saying:

"It's a good thing you made a clean breast of it, otherwise things would have gone badly with you."

"I feel that myself. Thank you."

The Ryazanite, following in Esei's wake, murmured reproachfully:

"He said: 'A Ryazanite from Ryazan.' But what sort of a Ryazanite am I if Dmitri himself stands up for me?"

Now they were discussing the case of the bellringer's widow. This, too, was a case of damage, and it was the overseer himself who had wrought havoc in her kitchen garden.

"It is as bad as if the Tatars had gone by," whined the little widow. "The onions are sticking out with their bellies upward. Only the stumps of the cabbages are left. The carrots will have to be dug up with a fork now, for all the green tops have been eaten."

"The overseer?" asked Dmitri.

"Who else? He is a healthy bull of a man and lusts after my widowhood all the time."

"I do not lust after you. Take a look at yourself. Who in his senses would lust after you? My lord, she is slandering me precisely because I do not desire her."

Dmitri blushed. Such talk made him feel ashamed.

"I did not question you, officer. What sort of a fence have you, my good woman?"

"What sort of a fence can I have—me, a widow?"

The officer began to speak again:

"In the law code it is written that a fence of seven solid stakes and two seasoned pegs has to be placed round a field, so that cattle may not break through and sheep climb over. And round a barn—that is to say, round a vegetable plot, too—there must be a trustworthy fence of nine stakes."

"What sort of cattle have you?"

"None at all," answered the widow.

"None?"

At that instant a rider galloped into the yard and hastened to the steps.

"Lord Dmitri Ivanovich, I bear you tidings. Permit me to give them to you."

"Go into the chamber."

Dmitri also passed into the cottage and gave ear to what the man had to say.

Mitiai's ship sailed along the shores of the Crimea. The wind was favourable and the sea calm. The coast of Byzantium had already been sighted when the Metropolitan was suddenly taken ill and had died.

"Are you sure he was not murdered?"

"They say that there were no traces of assault on his body."

"Perhaps he had eaten something which disagreed with him?"

"His cook was from Kaffa. He should not have agreed to this. The Phrygians are not our enemies. We wanted to convey his corpse to Constantinople, but the Phrygians persuaded us not to. It would be an ill omen, they said, as though a corpse had been set up as Metropolitan. So it was transferred to another ship bound for Galatia."

"Any further news?"

"No, my lord."

"Go."

Dmitri remained alone for a time. This was, indeed, a blow. But who had dealt it? Mitiai had had enemies among the monks, but surely his fellow-travellers had nothing against him?

"And where were Boyar Kochevin's eyes? He must have grown fat and gone to sleep. I placed confidence in him because he is lettered, a good conversationalist and learned; he will see what is afoot. Yet for all his learning he has failed in his trust. He missed his opportunity."

Silent and with anger raging in his heart Dmitri came out on to the stoop again. He seemed to see everything with another pair of eyes.

"So you say, widow, that you have no cattle of your own?"

"How could I have, weak woman that I am?"

"Then, overseer, you yourself shall put up a fence round her vegetable garden. He to whom the cattle belongs shall do the fencing. But he who has no cattle has no one from whom to fence himself off. And see to it that the fence is according to the specifications you read out just now—nine stakes between two pegs. Also see that the work is done quickly. I shall come and have a look at it myself. And, except for the onions, you will replace from your own beds all the vegetables that suffered damage. As to the onion crop, it should have been garnered long ago, so it is her own fault if they were harmed. It does not become you, officer, to deserve harsh words from a widow. An officer receives his appointment with a view to protecting the weak, not to injure them. For this you will be deprived of your rank. If you make the fence badly you will be whipped for negligence."

Thereupon he ordered the court to be closed until the following day.

Summoning his boyars and retinue to attend him, he entered the house, and when all were assembled he said:

"Brothers, our father the Metropolitan Mihail Mitiai has died at sea."

Brenko asked quietly:

"Died a natural death?"

Dmitri stepped back and looked fixedly at Brenko.

"There is no mark of violence," he said.

Brenko shook his head thoughtfully:

"No? Who ever heard of a man dying naturally while at sea without being drowned?"

"It is the will of God," observed Dmitri.

"Is it God's will?" questioned Brenko.

"We shall have to find another Metropolitan. That is my wish," said Dmitri. "And before the Patriarch has time to find one!"

Brenko reflected for a while, then he said:

"Who?"

"Cyprian," answered Dmitri, to everyone's astonishment.

"Yet it was here, in Liubutsk, that insults were rained on him. To this day I do not think he has got over the outrage."

"Excellent! He bears us ill-will, sees no hope of obtaining favours from Moscow. Now, suddenly, we are gracious to him. He will soon be tamed."

"That's a splendid idea, my lord," said Tiuchev with approval.

"We must send for Father Sergei. Let him think the matter over. As for Mitiai, make inquiries, Mihail Andreich. When his escort returns find out who was with him. Ask and find out all you can. Also, have no scruples in your questioning. Maybe you'll get them to talk."

He went out on to the steps and from that elevation he saw a flotilla of boats sailing on the Oka.

"Mihail Andreich. look there."

"What is it, my lord?"

"Are those not Tarasev's craft? He promised to buy armourers in the Horde before the Feast of the Intercession. It looks as if he were really bringing them."

"They are going past. Evidently they do not intend to land."

"They are making full sail to Moscow."

"There is a petition to you, my lord. Last year many folk from Ryazan fled to these parts. Not all of them have found land to settle on. They ask for your clemency."

"Receive them and see that they settle down here. There is enough freehold for every one. Speak kindly to them and grant them privileges. Let them settle. Others will join them later. We need people. Moscow will grow stronger through them."

He descended the stoop and went on his way through the settlement. For the first time he fell athinking of Mitiai. Death is not terrible. The only thing terrible about it is that it always comes before its time is due.

Chapter XXXVI

THE FEAST OF CHRIST'S BAPTISM

THE WINTER TURNED OUT TO BE STORMY AND FROSTY.

Kyrill went out to kill a wild beast and his hunt proved successful. He returned to his cave. The snow scrunched beneath his feet and he felt as if he were treading on air. He had grown warm under the burden with which he was laden. So he halted and threw it down. He thrust his hunting-spear into the snow and, wiping the perspiration from his face, took a look around.

The day was drawing in and the trees, beneath their heavy blue mantle of hoarfrost, seemed like frozen clouds. Some bullfinches, looking for all the world like shards from the frosty sunset, sat on a bough. Kyrill startled them with a hissing sound:

"Sh, sh!"

But only the dun-coloured hens took any notice of him, fluttering away to neighbouring bushes, while the cock birds merely turned round and pecked frozen elderberries from beneath the hoar.

"What impudent creatures!" exclaimed Kyrill as he glanced around him.

Behind him stood Andrei, shivering. His head drooped between his shoulders, which were all hunched up. His cheeks, instead of reddening with the cold, had become green. He stared at the birds.

"Forest life is not for the likes of you, boy," said Kyrill. "You'll freeze to death here."

Andrei remained silent.

"And if one stand motionless the numbness only increases. It freezes harder about sundown. Let's get a move on."

So they set off, their feet sinking into the snow.

Where could he find shelter for Andrei from the bitter cold? Who would take the lad in from the rigours of forest life and the adversities of the times?

Everybody Kyrill called to mind was either far away or had long ago disowned this unfrocked monk, who had forsworn his monastic vows and his holy vocation, had shed blood and continued to shed it—for he was ruthless with the Tatar caravans on the trade routes. How could he ever expect forgiveness for all the evil he had perpetrated, the murders he had committed, this man of violent passions?

They emerged into the glade.

A snowdrift had long since buried the hut. The horse's skull alone remained clear, with its black eye-sockets peering forth as though the drift had covered the skeleton of a horse instead of a hut. The men lived in dug-outs underground, crawling into them like wild beasts into their lairs. Kyrill was too tall to be able to stand upright in such a hut. All through the winter he lived as he had always done throughout life, with his back bent. Whenever he raised his head he either hurt it or broke through the roof. The fire in the corner smoked so much that it well-nigh suffocated the inmates huddled together to warm themselves. This was no place for a delicate boy, among peasants crazed by the fumes and rolling restlessly on bearskins.

When the men had partaken of baked meat they lay down to sleep, snuggling among the skins. There were only four of the band that night, for Kyrill had sent Schap and Timoshei to Pronsk for provisions, while seven of them had been dispatched to Ryazan before Christmas to carry on their profession. Schap voluntarily placed himself under Kyrill's leadership and the whole gang had followed suit. Schap did not feel that he possessed the qualities to make a stand against Kyrill, for he had neither the latter's strength nor wisdom nor experience. So he did not even try.

Nil, one of the outlaws, leaned against the wall groaning and tossing to and fro. Back in the summer he had been severely mauled by some Tatar merchants so that his arm had withered and he was of no further use in his profession.

"What's up?" asked Kyrill at length. "Is it aching again?"

"One moment it's cold, another it's hot. How can I bear it?"

"What can one do about it?"

"I want to go away."

"Where to?"

"Maybe a monastery would take me in. I have a gift to offer them."

"Would you go there to expiate your sins?"

"What sins have I ever committed?"

"You have killed your fellow men."

"Only to save myself from being killed by them."

"And you've been a robber."

"Who does not rob hereabouts?"

"That won't count as excuse in a monastery."

"The monks will not ask me such a question. I have a gift for them."

A sudden thought flashed into Kyrill's mind. He raised himself on the bearskin and threw off his sheepskin coat. He listened.

Up aloft, under the snow, the customary rhythms of the forest flowed on. The woods droned with a hollow sound and the stealthy steps of wolves could be heard prowling around. Quietly, seldom quickening their pace, lynxes stole up. In the morning the snow round the hut bore the spoor of their paws.

When Kyrill opened his eyes in the darkness his thoughts were confused. Old Mikeisha was asleep, curled up like a clenched fist. Andrei's breathing was inaudible as he lay in his place. Kyrill closed his eyes again.

"A monastery," he mused, "a monastery . . ."

People found a refuge there from pitiless life. They shut themselves in behind the walls, hoping to evade attack from the enemy, the Prince's taxes, tribute, and duties; to escape from their fellow mortals, to avoid burdens great and small; indeed, to break with everything which goes to make up the life of a villain.

Kyrill had gone thither in search of knowledge and wisdom; but the monastic cell had proved to be too narrow for him. Others humbled and adjusted themselves, denied both their spirit and the desires of the flesh, envied those who remained outside in the world, and hated laymen. They cringed to their superiors, for they knew that it is harder to bear the burden of life in the world than monastic asceticism.

Kyrill's thoughts often turned to Sergei. He had heard the prior's name everywhere he went; and now, in the quiet and darkness, Sergei was more distinctly outlined in his reflections.

Quiet in gait and voice: loud in fame. Who was this man? Each word he uttered was passed on from mouth to mouth. Did he intentionally speak thus softly that his words might be passed on? Was this the reason that his monks of Troitsa were dispersed throughout Russia? And among those words, were there not fewer about God than about the Prince of Moscow? Which served which? Prince and prior were as one man. Fifteen years ago the Prince of Nizhni-Novgorod had obstinately refused to submit to Moscow. From out the fastnesses of the forest where Troitsa was built Sergei had emerged and gone to Nizhni. He had ordered all the churches to be closed and forbade the celebration of the services, saying to the people: "Your Prince Boris does not understand the work of God. Until he comes to his senses he will neither enjoy the mercy of God nor the services of the Church." This had made Boris think hard. His people began to murmur against his rule and his soldiers turned away from him as if he were an apostate. A few more days might go by and then the people would destroy Boris's mansions in the name of God and tear their Prince's entrails out. Boris was thus constrained to submit. The question which had started the dispute was no insignificant matter, for the khan had given Boris a charter declaring Nizhni-Novgorod a Grand Principedom with the right to collect tribute for the khan throughout Russia. This right had been conferred upon Boris and not upon Dmitri. But at a hint from Sergei Boris had cancelled the agreement.

Had Sergei been an ordinary monk he would not have interfered in mundane affairs, nor would he have dared to stop the divine service. He was no monk, but a soldier disguised in an old habit. At that same time Moscow granted Troitsa many acres of land, villages, reclaimed fields, and labourers. Such gifts were not made for nothing!

Sleep forsook Kyrill altogether.

Slowly the image of Sergei revealed itself. The worn habit slipped off; the gentle voice took on a harsh, uncompromising tone. Light broke in upon Kyrill's mind: a firm hand held the curb-reins of the steed which is called Faith. That which an untutored man like Dmitri failed to grasp, Sergei from his hiding-place in the woods understood.

"But if faith responds to the curb," thought Kyrill, "if it does not lead, but lets itself be guided, why did I endure torment? Why did I seek humility? Was it merely that Dmitri might rise higher and higher?"

He reviewed his whole life, wave upon wave, quick in its ebb and flow, and packed with events.

Here he lay on his back in a forest den. Many people in Russia were lying

just as he was, hiding in woods, or resting from their labours in the lairs of wild beasts, wrapped in the skins of wild animals, fearing to utter human words, afraid of one another, grown wild and trampled into the earth on which they grew corn and many crops for others to enjoy. An old minstrel in Kolomna had told him that in times of old things had been otherwise. But would such good times ever come again?

How could he raise his hand against the Prince?

Only at night, only in the dense forest, only 'twixt sleep and waking, can a man harbour such bold thoughts.

Scattered as they were in the forests, segregated in villages, and in settlements of no more than two or three homesteads each, where would they find unity of purpose? They gathered together for war, when a campaign was afoot, when they had to fight for the Prince's towns; they had to face death and afterwards speedily dispersed again. "A battle is what we need," thought Kyrill. "So that we may conquer and then, while we are still all together, demand . . . But what, and of whom?" Would Mikeisha know? But the old man was asleep. And in any case, how could he know? If it was a question of violence Kyrill knew all about that himself, and Mikeisha would know of no other way. Andrei was so small. If only he could be got away from forest life! But whither? Who would give him a home?

In the whole world there was but one person to whom Kyrill could have told the brutal truth, and she was far away and very possibly dead. He would have felt no shame in asking such a favour of her. If Mamai had not ruined her, had not taken her into captivity, or frightened her away, Aniuta would have been the very person. But then, had not Mamai invaded, perhaps Kyrill would never have found Andrei.

He came to a decision. As soon as it was light enough he took a scrap of paper from his wallet, diluted dried bear's blood by thawing out some snow, and wrote:

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost!

Father Sergei,

Forgive my presumption in addressing you, for I am a sinful man, lewd and unclean. I do not know what insight made you see through me and recognize me for what I am. But though you are so clear of vision I am not ashamed or afraid. You saw that I had fallen from grace and that I could not have done otherwise, for such was my fate. Had I been endowed with wisdom, though my flesh was weak, blessed father, like you I should have chosen companions from among our heroes. Had I possessed power, but been dull-witted, I should have followed a wise man, and the wise man would have utilized my hands in his defence, and with these same hands I would have slain his foes. I should have been condemned for ruthlessness, but he would have been praised for his good-natured tolerance and gentleness. I have book-learning, and life has taught me its lessons. I am strong of body and I see the path I must follow. I kill my enemies with my own hands and I do not ask either for money or blame or clemency for myself. I pray for my son. He is weak and helpless, and forest life is harsh and our times are even harsher. Give him shelter and cultivate his spirit as I, a sinner, have sheltered his body. I can think of no one else in the whole world who can warm him, and it is very cold and stormy indeed in these parts.

When the Feast of Our Lord's Baptism arrived the frost crackled throughout the whole of Russia. The cold was so intense that the ice on the rivers was

cloven through sheer brittleness. Frozen branches fell from the trees. Birds froze on the wing and dropped like stones on the hard crust of snow.

On the Moscow river, opposite the Tainitsa Tower, a ceremony was held which represented Christ's Baptism by John in the Jordan. A hole was hewn in the ice to serve as font, and over the whole a shrine of ice was built. Green firs surrounded it and willing hands decorated the prickly verdure with blue, red, and ash-grey rags and ribbons so that they looked like flowers.

All Moscow forgathered to commemorate Christ's Baptism.

On a scarlet carpet behind the bishops Dmitri stood on the ice, capless.

The choir sang. A bishop lowered a large silver cross into the ice-hole, and the cross in his hands sparkled as if it were made of ice, and its silver was covered with hoarfrost. With heads bared Dmitri's entire court stood behind the Prince. There was only one exception, and that was the old Prince Tarussa, who was so decrepit that he was permitted to wear a red silk scarf round his head. But his beard was bedecked with huge clusters of icicles. Who would venture to cover his head when the Grand Prince himself stood bareheaded until the end of the ceremony of blessing the waters?

Metropolitan Alexei used to say: "Observe all the forms of Russian piety. They are like a hoop around our motherland. They are both hoop and sword."

Thousands of Muscovites stood round the font on the ice. The women had put on many-hued shawls and kerchiefs, and their fur collars and the borders of their garments were white with frost. Their breath rose in fleecy clouds.

The celebrant bishop had barely plunged his holy-water sprinkler into the font and dashed the icy water into the faces of the praying multitude than helter-skelter down to the ice-hole came sick persons hoping to be cured of their ailments, clowns, dulcimer-players, dancers and fornicators, hoping to atone for the year's accumulation of sins by an act of Christian asceticism. As they ran they shed their furs, sheepskin coats, and felt boots on the ice. They even threw off their shirts.

While intoning the liturgical prayers they immersed themselves in the ice-hole. This they did thrice. Then with glazed eyes, their bodies a-tingle with the cold, they raced back to their sheepskin coats and felt boots. Some with their sheepskins half unbuttoned threw themselves on the ground and rolled in the snow, trusting thereby to warm themselves the quicker.

There would not have been so vast a throng of worshippers at the blessing of the waters had it not been for this annual ceremony at the font in atonement for the dancing and singing and all the pagan pastimes which had crept into Orthodox life.

Having gone on foot with the procession of the Baptism, Dmitri warmed himself by drinking mulled mead in the warm chamber of his palace, where he rubbed his back against the glowing stove and said:

"Eh, but the weather is indeed cold!"

By the time dusk fell he was at table. Then, wiping his fingers and beard on a towel, he wagged his head approvingly and said:

"White-Sea sturgeon are fat!"

Later he went downstairs and took his place with Evdokia and his sons in a sledge covered with a carpet over soft hay. He was accompanied by many other similar sledges containing friends and relatives as he drove through the streets of Moscow.

And the sledges, grazing fences and walls with their oaken runners, tore along roads which were so slippery that they shone in the frosty starlight. The tracks

made in the snow by the sledges were like glittering sword-blades. Dmitri, leaning over Evdokia, who was full of gaiety and whose cheeks were flushed, growled:

"Oh, this is something like a frost! It makes one gasp. What a frost!"

In the icebound city the timber cottages crackled in the frost, the people returned from the ceremony at the Moskva river, sledge-runners screeched over the snow, low-slung sledges knocked down the passers-by. Many turned round to gaze after them. Two pilgrims were walking through Moscow. A cap of lynx fur had been pulled down over the face of the elder of the pair, whose eyebrows grew together over the bridge of his hooked nose, which had been broken at some time or other. His beard was straw-coloured. As he looked around he rolled the whites of his green eyes. One arm hung limply at his side as if it were a whip. The second was a mere boy, slender and emaciated. His dark and searching eyes peered at the high turrets of the churches, at the swiftly-drawn sledges with their gay decorations. He also scrutinized Dmitri's face. But he kept silent about everything.

Thus, unknown, they passed that day through Moscow.

Chapter XXXVII

THE TATAR HOSTS

IT WAS NOW THE SPRING OF 1380.

As soon as the wide expanses of the steppe were flushed with tender green Mamai moved his nomad camp up along the course of the Volga.

Winter lay behind him. During the whole of the cold weather he had been making preparations for a large-scale campaign. There had been negotiations, promises, earnest-money, gifts. The herds moved at a leisurely pace over the juicy young grass. Horses were gathering strength. The camels were moulting their matted winter coats. The bleating of sheep resounded for many miles round.

Following the herds came the warriors' tents, their families and household possessions. The carts creaked, the lumbering wheels screeched, human voices hummed in the air, the herds bleated and bellowed—this was the age-old drone of the Horde on the move as it crept slowly but inexorably northward.

Early in June Mamai crossed the Volga. This operation cost no little time and trouble. None the less, ten days later the Horde had resumed its leisurely and inexorable advance to the north.

Fresh and unknown tribes and troops joined the Golden Horde as it meandered along. Mamai was in no hurry. He thought it best that these warriors of varying nationalities should get used to one another—like one herd with an alien one.

On reaching the mouth of the Voronezh Mamai called a halt.

From here he sent Bernaba on the road to Kaffa to meet the Genoese infantry, and to spur the men on by the promises of speedy victories. Young Murza Ismail was dispatched to Oleg of Ryazan to remind the Prince of the agreement against Dmitri, while Murza Dzhavad left for Lithuania to interview Prince Jagiello, with whom during the winter agreement had been reached.

On a high mound at the spot where the Voronezh joined the Don a silken

quilted tent was erected for Mamai's use. Seated there the khan gazed down on the wide and freely flowing Russian rivers, on the droves of Horde horses grazing greedily in the lush meadows. Long ago Ghenghis-khan had ordained that horses should be given freedom and rest before embarking on an arduous campaign.

"A well-fed horse is the secret of speed."

The foe did not know this, and therein lay the secret of rapid marches, unexpected blows, and sudden attacks in the enemy's rear. Other secrets had also been bequeathed by Ghenghis. Mamai knew them and treasured them. The enemy could never hold his ground if he were completely encircled. He was always ready for a frontal attack and mustered his forces in one place. The Tatars, therefore, never struck at the front, they merely created a diversion while throwing their full weight on the flanks, thus dislocating the unity of the opposing forces, rolling them back, and hurling themselves on defenceless countries. This was Ghenghis's second secret. Further secrets there were which had been carried out by Batu-khan who was invariably victorious. Mamai-khan had diligently studied and memorized all these.

Mamai was informed that a woman had arrived from Ryazan and craved audience of him.

"A woman?"

"None other, khan."

"From Ryazan?"

"That is so, khan."

"From Oleg?"

"No, khan, she has come on her own account."

Mamai was alone, but sent for the more intimate of his murzas. When they had assembled and were seated on a rug at his feet he ordered the woman to be brought into his presence.

She entered and instantly saluted him as though she had seen him before. The interpreter said:

"This is Ovdotia, a woman of Ryazan. She names you 'Tsar', gives you her greetings, and requests that you hear what she has to say."

"I am listening to the woman Ovdotia," answered Mamai.

"When you burned down Ryazan . . ." the woman began.

"I recollect the incident perfectly," said Mamai.

"You led away into captivity my husband, my brother, my father-in-law, my brother-in-law. I have come to petition you to let them go free and to allow me to pay the ransom, Tsar Mamai."

"Never before has a woman set forth on such a quest."

"There are no men left in my family."

"If there are no men left, with whom does Prince Oleg propose to join me?"

"I do not know, sire, where he is to find men."

"And how much have you in mind to pay for your kinsfolk?"

"The question is how much you intend to charge for them."

"Eight horses apiece."

"I have enough for one."

"Which of them do you choose to ransom?"

"My brother, Tsar."

Mamai was taken aback.

"Your brother? What about your husband?"

"I can marry again and thus have a husband. If I have a husband I shall naturally have a father-in-law. I can have a child by my husband and if my

father-in-law has a son I shall have a brother-in-law. But a brother I shall never have again, for my parents were burned to death in the sack of Ryazan."

"Are all the women of Ryazan like you?" grinned Mamai.

"Whether all are like me I know not, but I am no fairer than most."

"So far as your face is concerned you are not fair to behold, for there is a scar on your forehead and you are no longer very young."

Mamai glanced round at his murzas. He wished to impress them. He recalled that the world's greatest conquerors had always shown magnanimity in order to arouse the wonder and admiration of posterity. But to ensure such admiration it was necessary to couch this magnanimity in words of penetrating wisdom which would be memorized by future generations. Bernaba could have prompted him, but the Genoese was absent. So Mamai plucked a small, hard, white blossom growing beside his rug and, handing it to Ovdotia, said:

"You may walk freely within my Horde until this flower withers, and should you find any of your kinsmen within that time, you may take him back without ransom. Allah commands us to show mercy to women."

Ovdotia, with downcast eyes, looked bitterly at the frail flower. Then, suddenly, her face was irradiated.

"I thank you, Tsar. You do not realize the measure of your magnanimity."

Mamai smiled complacently.

"Silly woman!"

Escorted by warriors, Ovdotia rambled in leisurely fashion among the Horde. The blossom she held in her hand could never die, for it was one of the hardy little everlasting which grow on the Don steppes. She knew her native land better than any foreigner such as Mamai could.

That same day Mamai received two pieces of news.

Oleg sent to inform him that he was collecting an army, that he had a goodly supply of arms, that he stood firmly by their agreement, and requested Mamai not to forget his own promises.

The khan dispatched a messenger with a reply consisting of but two words: "I remember."

The second piece of news came from Bernaba.

He had encountered the Black Infantry of Kaffa on the march and was returning in its company. In about three days they expected to reach Mamai's headquarters on the Voronezh. The khan decided to await their arrival at that spot.

He dispatched another messenger to Lithuania to inform Prince Jagiello Olgerdovich:

"Mamai remembers his pledge. But do you, too, Prince Jagiello, remember yours?"

The khan was unaware, however, that ever since he had set forth from Sarai Dmitri's troops had been infiltrating themselves among his own men. Nor did he know that Dmitri's frontier patrols were stationed on the Voronezh. These patrols numbered among their ranks such men as Rodion Zhidovinov, Andrei Popovich, and fifty more stalwarts. For eleven days they had ridden round the outskirts of the Horde and were barely able to complete the circle in the eleven days.

On this, the twelfth day, one of them fell into the hands of a Tatar scouting party. He succeeded in overwhelming two of them, but the rest dragged him from his horse by lassoing him. At the close of that day, when the rim of the setting sun was lazily sinking below the grass of the steppe in a blaze of red, Andrei Popovich was hauled before Mamai:

"Our patrol seized him. We know not whence he comes."

"Where are you from?" asked Mamai.

"What do you mean by 'where am I from'? I am on my own land."

But this had proved a good day. It was a long time since the Horde had possessed such vast armed forces. So Mamai laughed :

"You are not by any chance a Muscovite?"

"You have guessed correctly. I am."

"And is my servant Dmitri of Moscow aware that I am on my way to pay him a visit?"

"I shouldn't be at all surprised!"

"And is he aware that my forces number twelve hordes, three kingdoms and thirty-three princes, in addition to the Christians who have rallied to me? Further, does he know that my troops total seven hundred and three thousand? And that after these great hosts had placed themselves under my command, more came to join me, and no count could be kept of them?"

"Whether he is aware of all this I know not. But if you order me to do so I shall inform him."

"Well and good. You had better tell him. And you might further inquire whether my servant Dmitri is in a position to provide a suitable welcome for us all."

Mamai thereupon released the Russian warrior. He felt confident of his power. There was none to equal it in the world. Let Dmitri learn this from the lips of one of his own men. He would be more apt to believe it.

The Russian warrior crossed the entire Tatar camp. Then he wrenched his horse's bridle from the hand of the khan's groom and vaulted into the saddle. As he did so he struck some of the Tatars in the face with his heel as if by accident, settled himself into the saddle, and galloped off to the north. He travelled by night in order to give the grass time to rise again before morning and thus cover his tracks.

On the morrow Mamai summoned a grand council of princes, murzas, and commanders. The whole mound was littered with them as they lounged about on the rugs or sat among the feather-grass. Their great numbers filled Mamai's soul with pride. He spoke :

"We are rested. Indeed, we have been resting ever since the days of Batu-khan. It is time for us to stretch our legs. Now we shall march across the Russian land as Batu did of yore. We shall enrich ourselves with Russian gold. We shall reduce Russian towns to ashes and curb the rebellious arrogance of our Russian vassals."

Suddenly he thought of Dmitri and his heart was filled with rage.

"We shall punish these refractory slaves. They have forgotten the great power of the Golden Horde!"

Short and wiry as he was, he jumped to his feet the better to see his more distant allies over the heads of those who sat near by.

What a multitude! Seized with impatience, he ordered that the march up the Don should begin the next morning. Like an arrow that route sped in a direct line towards Moscow.

Every day messengers came and went, while fresh tribes and princes joined the host. Mamai's own subjects as well as mercenaries rallied to him. The dashing Taurmenian cavalry arrived on horses as slender-legged as deer. They were dazzled by visions of gold to be looted from Muscovy.

Like a vast sea, the nomad forces rolled up the stream of the river Don.

Chapter XXXVIII

OLEG WRITES TWO LETTERS

OLEG PACED UP AND DOWN IN HIS STONE MANSION. HIS SOFT LEATHER BOOTS made no noise as he trod the pile of the carpets. Though outside the heat was scorching, within the walls of the house it was cool and shady.

A large blue lamp burned before an immense ikon depicting All Saints. The place still reeked of incense after the recent services for the dead. Princess Efrosinia had lost her mother. Death had come timely, for a new house is always sanctified by a death. But Oleg was troubled in mind because this death had occurred far away from Ryazan, and who could tell whether his mother-in-law's passing had really cleared a space for the living within these walls? Also, the old lady might not have died had Efrosinia remembered to transfer some of the live coals from the old stove to the new. But she had forgotten.

He went up to the ikons. The saints, painted in the Byzantine style, gladdened his eyes by the flowing outlines and the blending of bright colours into a single pattern.

He gazed at the grey beards rippling like water from their countenances; at the emaciated faces of the great martyrs; at the olive-tinted and alien cheeks of early-Christian women, chastely wrapped in Hellenic veils. The blue light suffusing them from the lamp made them seem more aloof, as if they were visible only through translucent heavens.

Oleg strode about alone, a prey to melancholy and confusion of mind.

For many years he had been preparing a stroke against Moscow. One winter night he and Tit Kozelski had sat up all through the dark hours on the warm stove, discussing affairs as they watched the frost patterns forming on the window-panes. Their hopes had been high, and it had appeared so simple then to fulfil them, to seize and destroy the dolt Dmitri. But the years had rolled by and the dream was still a dream.

Now Oleg had prepared everything. Throughout last winter he had carried out negotiations with Mamai and with Jagiello, having forgiven and conceded much to the latter. All had agreed to strike in unison, and it seemed as if no force on earth could withstand their combined strength.

The Prince moved away from the ikons and seated himself by the window in front of a reading-desk carved out of walnut wood. He was fond of this lectern and used it not only for reading but also for copying in Greek the Alexander Romance. Tidings had reached him that Mamai was wandering with the Horde along the river Voronezh. Wherefore such haste? Was the khan losing patience? They had settled to deal the blow in September, yet it was still June, the closing days of bright and verdant June.

He smoothed out a thick piece of paper and rapidly wrote a letter to Lithuania. Herein he reminded Jagiello of the dates decided upon and advised his ally to get ready in advance. Oleg was seized with doubt as to whether Jagiello would be late or be prevented by some mischance. It would be wiser to join forces sooner. What if Jagiello vacillated, or lent an ear to rumour and the counsels of wily advisers? He added quickly:

And no sooner will Dmitri learn of Mamai's strength and of our alliance with him than he will become as one demented with fear. He will forsake his Moscow and flee to distant parts—perhaps to Novgorod-the-Great or to the Dvina, and

we shall set ourselves up either in Moscow itself or at Vladimir. As soon as the khan arrives we must welcome him with rich gifts, implore him not to sack the towns. Also we shall have to remind him of his promises to grant us charters. Then you, Prince Jagiello Olgerdovich, will annex those parts of the Muscovite domains adjacent to your principality of Vilna, while I shall take the other half and join it to my territories of Ryazan. It therefore behoves us to take time by the forelock, enter Dmitri's land hot on his trail and occupy his seat of government.

He rolled up the letter, secured it with a cord, sealed it with red wax, and for a while held the transparent, yellow scroll between his fingers.

Pushing the door ajar, he ordered a page to summon boyar Epifan Koreiev. It was a glorious summer day and from the window Oleg could see barges, with red and blue sails set, floating down the Oka. The boyar entered and, bowing several times, stood by the door.

"Good health to you, my lord."

"Epifan Semenich, I am sending you to Lithuania."

"I know the way, Oleg Ivanovich."

"I want you to carry a missive to Jagiello, and be speedy about it."

"You know that I am not given to dallying."

"That is why I choose you. God be with you, Epifan Semenich."

"Have you naught you wish me to transmit by word of mouth?"

"Well, if necessary you can tell him: 'It is of urgent importance that you do not tarry.'"

"I quite understand, my lord. I shall set out today."

They took leave of one another. But Koreiev paused:

"Have you heard the news, my lord? Mamai is said to have left the Voronezh and to be moving up the Don."

Oleg caught his breath. He had been waiting for this. The time had come.

"Why was I not told earlier?"

"Fugitives brought the rumour. We have received no news from our patrols."

"Very well, then. You'd better be making a start."

Again he was left to himself alone.

"What if Mamai changes his mind and turns back? Or if Jagiello alters his plans? Mamai already on the move! They are still a goodly distance away, but Dmitri is here with eyes everywhere. Sofroni is with him, too. A priest, a spiritual father, a Judas!

He limped up to the ikons. Yes, they were skilfully painted, but the fine workmanship of the Byzantine artist no longer intrigued his mind. He stood awhile and then went limping towards the reading-desk. A transparent piece of yellow paper which had been cut off from his letter to Jagiello lay upon it. His eyes sparkled, and with feverish haste he wrote to Dmitri:

Are you aware, Prince Dmitri Ivanovich, that Mamai with the whole of his accursed Horde is advancing upon Ryazan, against you and me? He is leading a vast multitude—Yasi, Armenians, Buttasi, Cherkasi, Franks—and your most hated enemy Jagiello is with him also. I shall bar their way as long as I have any strength left. Our hand is still firm. Be vigilant and of good cheer.

Oleg sat awhile lost in thought and laid down the quill. He seemed in no hurry to roll up the scroll.

"Will he flee? What if he does not? Still, in any event, he will not touch me. Why should he?"

The Prince tied the cord and only now noticed that he still held the seal in his left hand. He pressed the seal into the little ball of wax and looked to see whether his monogram stood out clearly. But whom was he to send with the dispatch?

At that very moment a page appeared in the doorway. Oleg rushed over to the desk and slammed down the cover to hide the scroll.

"What is it?"

"A messenger from Mamai."

"Well?"

"Shall I bring him in?"

"Why are you loitering about there?"

"Shall I call him to your presence?"

"What's amiss with you, my lad? What are you gaping at? What did I tell you?"

"I do not understand, my lord. Mamai's messenger stands without."

"God, boy, usher him in."

A Tatar, his rough crimson boots covered with dust and wearing a thickly padded coat with a homespun sash, entered the room and doffed his cap. But he did not remove the skull-cap which protected his tonsured crown. Two greasy plaits hung over his ears from under the skull-cap, and either from these plaits or from the shiny oily cheeks of the squat, bow-legged warrior there issued a nauseous stench.

"He's chosen a fine messenger!" thought Oleg.

"The tsar and great khan sends you greeting. He commanded me to inform you that he, the tsar and great khan, remembers. He gave me no other message."

"Very good," replied Oleg.

The Tatar, while calmly examining the chamber, scratched himself with slow deliberation.

"Does he intend to tear the rugs from the walls?" reflected Oleg.

But the Tatar, completely ignoring Oleg's presence, scrutinized both the floor and desk. Then, still scratching himself in leisurely fashion, he casually sauntered from the room.

"A fine messenger!"

Anger gripped Oleg. Had he known how, he would have wept at this affront. He, the great Prince of Ryazan, descendant of the holy princes of Chernigov, to be compelled to receive so lousy a camel! And had such been Mamai's will he would have had to embrace the fellow. Stepping over the dusty footprints left on the floor, Oleg called into the vestibule:

"Summon the boyar Afanasi. Tell him to prepare for a journey. Quick!"

He took the letter to Dmitri from the desk and, holding it in his hand, seated himself on a bench. Whenever impatience overpowered him he invariably sat down. Thus his thoughts could fly with added swiftness and outstrip slow-moving time.

Afasani Mironov did not arrive at once, but when he put in an appearance he was ready equipped for the journey.

"Afanasi Ilich, you will bear this missive to Moscow and deliver it personally into the hands of Grand Prince Dmitri with my greeting. Also you will make inquiries about his health. Further, you must spy around to see how things are there."

A look of surprise came over Mironov's face as he took the letter.

"The wax seems to have melted, my lord. Have you been holding it for long in your hand?"

It was true, the wax had spread over the scroll. Had his hands been so hot? Oleg set about softening and kneading it anew. Then he pressed his seal upon it.

"So I am to take this to Moscow, my lord?"

"Yes. Why do you ask?"

"I had not grasped that fact. I was thinking: 'It appears that the Prince is sending me to the Horde. They say that a messenger of theirs has arrived.' So I concluded that you intended me to go back with him."

"To the Horde? Whatever for? As I told you, Afanasi Ilich, you are to go to Dmitri, and be quick about it."

"I know that you are an impatient man, my lord. I shall not delay, provided the horses hold out. But when I was bidding my family farewell I told them that of a surety I was being sent to the Horde. Well, fare you well, my lord. My mission will be carried out with all dispatch."

"And make a clean job of it."

"I take your meaning. It's not as if I were going to the Horde. But Dmitri has not your learning. He is a simple-minded fellow."

He bowed himself out, taking leave of his prince many times over before quitting the room. Oleg once more found himself alone.

"Dmitri has not my learning? He has no learning at all. Metropolitan Alexei wrote of him to the Patriarch Philopheas: 'Our prince is not versed in book-learning but understands the Scriptures with his heart.' Understands! What can he understand if he has never been taught? Is he worthy to be a prince? And yet he reigns, the people flock to him, princes recognize his sovereignty. Those book-lovers and scribes, Tarusa and the Bielozerskis, look up to him and consult him on important matters. What can he do? He sits on gold, has risen above the whole of Russia, while I alone stand in opposition. He lives in a wooden hut and personally cares for his horses in the stables. A mere groom! He follows the rabble on a lead, and the rabble rejoices!"

"Page!" he called.

"At your orders, my lord."

"Where is that Tatar?"

"Strolling about the courtyard and taking a look around."

"I shall send him back with an answer to Mamai."

"I'll let him know, my lord."

"Tell him to come tomorrow morning. Order my people to feed him copiously and give him a good bed."

"They'd thought of housing him in the barracks, my lord."

"The barracks are already overcrowded. A bed must be prepared for him in the vestibule. On the other side, and see to it that he is not disturbed."

"I'll do your bidding, my lord."

"Now go."

Alone once more! Oleg sat down to compose a propitiatory letter to Mamai.

Chapter XXXIX

FESTIVITIES AND MESSENGERS

IT WAS SO EARLY IN THE MORNING OF JULY 2 THAT THE SUN WAS STILL ALL ashimmer on the dew, the streets were in darkness, and the churches alone

caught the light, when Dmitri, accompanied by Evdokia, the children, Bobruk, Anna Ivanovna, Vladimir Andreich Serpuhovski, Elena Olgerdovna, Andrei Olgerdovich, and Polotski formed a long procession in their gaily-painted waggons. Menials, pages, senior boyars, and their wives were also of the company which set forth for the estate of Dmitri's brother-in-law, Mikula Vasilievich Veliaminov, there to celebrate a name-day.

Commemorative bells pealed out over the city. Townsfolk, in neat, holiday attire, thronged the thoroughfares—the women in flower-patterned gowns just taken out of the presses; the men in white or unbleached tunics which reached their knees, white trousers, and new, squeaky bast shoes. On meeting the princely train some prostrated themselves to the ground, while others bowed, as did likewise the passing monks. The priests blessed the Grand Prince's court. Dmitri, with Vladimir, Bobrok, and Polotski headed the procession.

Wheels creaked, and the cats, those daytime owls, sat on the gateposts blinking and mistaking the noise the wheels made for the squeaking of mice or the whistling of bullfinches. Horses neighed, servants trotted beside the coaches, the little princes shouted gleefully when they espied among the running servants their playmates and rivals in games or the sport of pigeon-racing.

Maria, the Grand Princess's younger sister, whose name-day it was, and her husband, Mikula Veliaminov, stood on outspread rugs at the foot of the porch holding bread and salt on a carved wooden platter. Mikula Vasilievich's uncle, the courtier Timofei Vasilievich, who had fought on the Vozha front two years earlier, was also there. He had arrived overnight to give a helping hand in the preparations for the reception.

The Grand Prince's youngsters pounced on the other children, and the whole band scampered off into the garden. Some were eager to show, while others were as eager to see, the many wonders of the place. Their elders exchanged prolonged greetings and embraces, then made their way upstairs into the mansion. Refreshments had been prepared for them after their long journey. The tables were covered with white linen and spread with roast game, salted viands, preserves, mead, fish cured in the Swedish fashion with pepper and onion, and spiced Hungarian sausage. The board exhaled an odour of seasoning, sweet-smelling herbs, and roots.

These appetizing snacks having been fully savoured, flutes and pipes struck up their music in the courtyard, while young maids began to sing in chorus as they danced in a ring. The guests hastened down the porch steps into the courtyard and formed a circle round the dancers, clapping their hands in encouragement. But the dancers felt too bashful to exhibit their prowess to the full—for was not Dmitri Ivanovich himself among the spectators?

Then the young princesses and the daughters of the boyars entered the ring. Chinese silk handkerchiefs glinted in the sunlight, flowery patterned Frankish gowns and Persian shawls from Shemakha twirled in the dance. Dmitri could contain himself no longer. He dashed down the steps and made his way to the centre of the ring, clapping his hands and stamping with his heel to the measure. At this the court jesters plucked up fresh courage, the pipes played louder and with a merrier swing. A whole day still lay ahead, with a copious dinner and undisturbed rest. Bright, fleecy clouds foretold a long and glorious summer day.

Far away, in the Kremlin, a Ryazan maiden, covering her face with a shawl, passed alone through the silent streets and her voice was full-toned and joyous as it trilled above the housetops. When she reached the Prince's court she

trembled with emotion as she glanced up at the lofty main entrance, which was carved and gaily painted. Warriors bantered and held out their arms to her, but she walked through the whole of the high and hilly Kremlin. The only voice she loved did not call out to her, and the eyes of her desire did not behold her. With sinking heart and bated breath she left the Kremlin, singing louder and walking more slowly. But all this availed her nothing, for no response was vouchsafed. Only the church bells continued to peal, while now and again people paused to marvel at the strange and striking singer wandering about unaccompanied and to listen to her remarkable voice.

But throughout Moscow people started up and pressed towards the windows, or, failing a window, they rushed out on to the porches of their houses, straining their ears to catch the sound of the approaching and then receding tramp of horses at the gallop. They wanted to have a look at the riders, and for this purpose ran into the square. Could it be messengers? Only messengers, and very special ones at that, were permitted thus to gallop across the city on their way to the Kremlin.

If a messenger, whence came he? What news did he bring?

The flutes were silenced and the sound of the pipes was sharply hushed. The flushed maidens paused in their dancing, quite at a loss. Dmitri, frowning, stood apart listening to the messengers, and no one ventured to approach without his summons.

The festive mood was quenched as Dmitri made his way through the gaily-dressed throng to accost his host:

"Mikula Vasilievich, where can we find a quiet spot in which to hold counsel and not be disturbed?"

"Will you be so good as to come upstairs?"

Dmitri summoned his more intimate councillors. He preceded them into the dining-hall, where the servants were laying the tables for dinner. They dispersed like a flock of sparrows, leaving one of the tables unladen with the cloth thrown across the middle. Dmitri himself put it to rights while waiting for the boyars to assemble. The scared women and anxious boyars crowded into the adjacent rooms. Young girls holding their breath stood in the vestibule.

"Mamai is on the march," said Dmitri. "The tidings come from two separate sources. One from Voronezh, where the messenger saw Mamai himself; while a boyar from Ryazan is at the Kremlin with a letter from Oleg. Oleg pays his respects to us rather too late in the day. We do not propose to defend his domains. If he pleases, he can send his troops here and place them at our disposal. This is no time for shilly-shallying. We must make ready with the utmost speed. Send messengers at once to all the princes. Let town-criers and news-bearers be posted throughout Moscow to inform the people. We shall have to issue proclamations forthwith."

Bobrok asked:

"What did the messenger say? How is Mamai?"

Dmitri told him.

Again Bobrok asked:

"Should we not do better to dispatch someone to him once more, to parley, so as to delay him?"

"We'll do so."

"Advance guards should be sent forward so as to let Mamai know that we are prepared to meet him," continued Bobrok. "Also they would serve as spies on the Horde."

"Agreed. Give orders for them to start at once," said Dmitri. "What else should we do?"

"Mamai boasted to our scout that Oleg is with him. Likewise your brother Jagiello is alleged to be joining them, Andrei Olgerdovich."

Jagiello was brother-in-law to Vladimir Serpuhovski.

"Ah," thought Vladimír, "Elena will be shedding more tears. She will say: 'Brother against brother and husband against my brother, too.'"

"Whom shall we send to Mamai?" asked Dmitri.

"Why not Boyar Zahari?" suggested the Grand Prince's secretary, Vnuk.

"Tiuchev?"

"Yes, he knows them well."

"I have nothing against that. Where is he?"

"I'll get him along in no time," said Mikula Vasilievich as he hurried to the door.

Since all his boyars were assembled here, there was no need for Dmitri to return to the Kremlin. The boyars lived in Moscow like a large and united family, stood godfathers to one another's children, exchanged baptismal crosses on the eve of battles—and Dmitri's battles were numerous—so that during the many years of campaigning they had all become brothers, spiritual brothers, for they had exchanged baptismal crosses.

Tiuchev entered quietly and unostentatiously.

"I am sending you to Mamai, boyar," said Dmitri. "I want you to find out things and make your own investigations. You know what I am driving at. The main point is to make it abundantly clear to him that we are aware of his intended invasion and are not intimidated. On the way you might pay Oleg a call and learn of his plans."

"Of course I shall go. I am always happy to serve you, my lord."

"It grieves me to send you, Zahari Andreich. I fully realize that you are going to the Tatars. You, too, must realize the fact."

"I understand and I rejoice, my lord."

"Would that I could choose someone else in your stead. But I can think of no one better fitted for such a job."

"No need to worry. Were anything to happen to me, lord, I place my trust in you. I know that my children will never go hungry."

"There is no question of any such thing."

"Dmitri Ivanovich, please bear this in mind. If the worst happens, I shall for ever be your intercessor before the Lord and pray for your victory. Fight hard!"

"Good-bye, Zahari. . . ."

The two men embraced and kissed one another fervently, and it was only when Dmitri released Tiuchev from his arms that he concluded with the customary patronymic:

". . . Andreich."

Without bestowing a glance on the others, Tiuchev bowed to right and to left. Then with head bent he strode from the room. Bobrok made way for him when he reached the doorway, and Tiuchev made a specially profound bow to the boyar. For Bobrok was a much loved and revered personality, though slightly feared by some. His erudition, his unfailing successes on the battlefield, had created for him the reputation of being a magician or a wizard, capable of foreseeing events to come and of reading people's hearts. In his youth the prince had known magicians, soothsayers, and sorcerers in Volhynia, had associated with them, and with them had roamed the countryside. He did not

repudiate gifts attributed to him. At times he would deign to consult the stars in order to tell what might befall. Also, as occasion demanded, and guided by the stars, he had led his troops by night—a feat unknown in the Russia of that day. With the stars as guide he had found his way out of dense forests in little-known lands, had fallen upon the enemy from an unexpected quarter. Bobrok's fame as sorcerer and wizard spread even into the camp of the foe.

"Are you going?" he asked Tiuchev.

"Yes. Farewell, Dmitri Mihailovich."

"Be of good cheer."

Such an encouraging farewell brought sudden relief to Tiuchev's mind. Perchance Bobrok knew there was no need for apprehension. A man is prone to believe what he wishes to believe.

Bobruk rejoined Dmitri.

"The first patrol has left, my lord. I have sent them to the Bystraia Sosna."

"Who is leading them?"

"Rodivon Rzhovski, and with him are Volosati Andrei, and Vasili Tupik, who begged to go with them, and many more fine young fellows volunteered."

"What is Brenko doing?"

"He went off hotfoot to the Kremlin. He is short of men here. Every able-bodied man has been sent off."

"Has no one been forgotten?"

"How could there be? Messengers have gone forth to warn all the princes. Those who are to go to the various towns will be dispatched from the Kremlin at once. As was agreed, I have issued orders that everyone is to muster at Kolomna on July 31."

"Now you, Vladimir Andreich, must see to it that all is ready in Moscow. Many of the soldiers will have to pass through the city, for the Bielozerski troops and many others have no other way."

"Each of your commands shall be carried out."

Suddenly the tables standing forlornly under the white cloths caught Dmitri's eye. He sniffed. Dinner was still baking in the ovens.

"Must we start work and forgo dinner?" thought Dmitri. "On no account!"

His glance fell upon Veliaminov, who was sitting at the end of the bench, a worried look on his countenance.

"Mikula Vasilievich, have you any intention of feeding us?"

"On the march?"

"Why on the march? I meant now."

"Of course, brother," and off bustled the host, overwhelmed with delight. "Everything's been ready for ages, my lord. I greatly feared that you would leave without satisfying your hunger. I shall have dinner served up instantly. I do hope it is not overcooked already."

Dmitri went out into the crowded rooms, where the women and children were expecting him. Some of them were red-eyed with weeping. Dmitri, feigning not to notice their excited and questioning looks, said:

"I expect you are famished. So am I. Dinner will be served immediately."

A general sigh of relief answered him. Evdokia alone approached her husband to say softly:

"Is all well?"

"Ay, it would seem that nothing has been overlooked. It smells appetizing enough."

At these words she, too, felt reassured.

Without attracting attention, Dmitri signed to Bobruk.

"Prince," he said, "see that all is quiet in Moscow. It must not look as if there were any trouble ahead."

"I'll see to that at once."

"You'd better dine first."

"There will be time enough to have dinner later."

Andrei Polotski called out to Bobrok:

"Mitia!"

"What do you want?"

"Can we find out whether Jagiello . . ."

Bobrok replied in a low voice:

"I know already. He is with them. Accompany our lord and tell him what we know."

Evdokia stood among the bright-faced women looking down over the orchard. There, under the apple trees, her Dmitri was slowly walking with Andrei Polotski a few paces to the rear. Polotski was speaking low and earnestly. All at once Dmitri came to a halt and turned to Andrei. Andrei nodded his head with downcast eyes.

Once more anguish gripped Evdokia's heart.

Chapter XL

BLESSING THE CAMPAIGN

DMITRI, WITH VLADIMIR SERPUHOVSKI, SOME OF THE BOYARS AND A SMALL MILITARY escort rode off to Troitsa to see Sergei. Time was so short that it was impossible for the abbot to go to Moscow, and since the Metropolitan See was now vacant there was no one else from whom to ask the customary blessing.

The cavalcade pushed its way through the dark forest trees whose verdure hung like a pall overhead. The horses snorted because they sniffed the presence of wild beasts in the vicinity, or they shied at fallen timber and dead boughs. The sunlight crept through the trunks of trees and fell in azure splashes across the woodland. The horsemen's garments constantly changed their hues, their armour at one moment sparkled and at another grew dim in the alternating shafts of light and shade. The track was not wide. Here and there, huge trunks brought to earth by gales or through old age lay across it and proved too massive and heavy to be moved. Branches of fir were hastily cut and laid on either side of the boles to form a bridge over which the horses could be led.

The day was on the wane and darkness was gathering amid the trees when Dmitri noticed a cross by the wayside.

"What does this commemorate?"

"It was at this place, my lord, that your messenger met his death a couple of years ago. Boyar Brenko ordered that a cross should be erected."

Dmitri crossed himself, and looked apprehensively from side to side. He felt ill at ease in the darkling wood. His mount started forward at sight of the ravine, or maybe he sensed the Prince's agitation. During the night the party forded the Voria.

When, before dawn, they caught sight of Troitsa through the mist, the monastery bell was already ringing for matins. A monk, standing with his back to them absorbed in thoughts of far-off things, swayed rhythmically to the

movement of the clapper. But when the gatekeeper admitted the warriors to the monastery precincts both the monk and the bell stopped their earlier motions. On recognizing Dmitri, the monk under the belfry showed the utmost agitation, and the quick vibrations cascaded far and wide through the forest.

Monks, pilgrims, and palmers hurried out of their cells. Inside the church the deacon's bass voice broke off and the deacon himself turned pale; the service stopped when Dmitri entered. The Grand Prince looked with disapproval at the congregation, which had turned their backs to the altar in order to get a better view of himself. Then he caught sight of a little maid, who, while scratching her stomach, stared at him open-mouthed, and peace entered his heart again.

Dmitri came forward and the service was resumed. At one with the whole congregation, the Prince knelt down, touched the floor with his forehead, saw in front of him only the colourful images, and the holy gates, on which was painted a scene of the Garden of Eden surmounted by the gilded dove.

The whole congregation, witnessing Dmitri's piety, began to pray earnestly. All realized that it was no trivial thing which had brought their Prince to this place. Something big must be happening in the outside world. So with tears in their eyes, the people who had for many a year been deprived of peaceful toil and were exhausted by constant levies for the Horde and the terrifying stories of Tatar invasions of Russian territory, besought God to grant them peace. The blood of their forbears had drenched the radiant flowers of their motherland, the smoke of burning towns and villages had dimmed the bright heavens above her, and Dmitri alone had resolved to fight the enemy and had bested him on the banks of the Vozha. Now, here he was in person.

Incense floated upward and Sergei austere continued the service, remaining patiently alone at the altar, even though he knew that Dmitri's unexpected arrival signified the beginning of a campaign.

A wide-eyed boy of slight build assisted Sergei. He preceded the prior with a lighted taper in his hand, offered him the censer at the appropriate moments after blowing on the charcoal to make it glow. Dmitri watched the lad's every movement. High forehead and eyebrows arched unevenly across it—it was the face of a saint. When Sergei whispered to the boy and the latter hastened from the altar to the sacristy with a smile, this smile held so much of sadness and sweetness in it that Dmitri's heart ached with yearning and compassion. The lad brought from the sacristy a precious crozier of Byzantine workmanship and came to a halt at the ambo while waiting for Sergei to emerge.

Matins were said, and Sergei divested himself of the shabby homespun linen vestments. He now stood in an old, rusty habit, girt about the middle with a narrow strap. Taking the richly ornamented crozier from his acolyte, he descended to the newcomers. He gave his blessing to the princes, who then followed him across the monastery grounds to his cell.

As the group passed through the orchard, the boy, who was walking behind Sergei, plucked handfuls of berries and proffered them to the guests. Dmitri stroked his head.

"That's a good idea, my lad," said the Prince.

The boy kissed Dmitri's hand.

"Whose boy is this?" asked Dmitri of the abbot.

"He came to me last winter." Then he added with a smile: "Do you recall how one day we went fishing on the Pereyaslavski Lake? I bargained to ferry a monk across in our boat."

Dmitri laughed at the recollection.

"It was that same monk who slew your messenger. He got off scot free, and I had nearly forgotten all about him. Last winter a wounded robber came to me. His arm was becoming palsied. He was a man who had sinned greatly, and he said to me: 'Father Sergei, as atonement for my manifold transgressions, may I serve in your hallowed abode?'—'Are your sins really so many?' I asked. 'Ay, that they are, father.' He made full confession of his crimes and I received him here. Such men can be relied upon to keep their monastic vows, for they have nowhere else to go. He brought this stripling with him. And with the boy came a letter from the unfrocked monk, Kyrill. In this lengthy epistle Kyrill revealed his whole life and showed his arrogance. He requested me to take the boy, for in the forest whither the man had fled from your wrath there is no shelter to be found either for the sick or the weak, and still less for a little lad such as this. So I accepted him."

Dmitri scrutinized Andrei.

"Well, is it very fearsome in the woods?"

"Not so bad, my lord, but the life is hard, the cold is great, and one cannot shelter from it. The outlaws dig caves for themselves and many folk flock thither as winter comes on."

"Are all of them malefactors and murderers? Wicked men?"

"Not wicked, sir."

"But they are criminals."

"God is the judge of their actions, which are as an open book to Him, though hidden from us."

"Did Father Sergei teach you such gentleness?"

"No, not Father Sergei, but the people you call criminals."

"Verily, this is strange."

"Question them yourself, my lord. Let each one of them tell you his life-story and the road he has travelled from his mother's breast to the shelter of the forest."

"That's wisely spoken. Can you remember your own life-story?"

Andrei told him in a few words.

Dmitri felt so abashed by the boy's precocious speech that he ceased to stroke his head. He listened as they strolled through the spacious grounds of the monastery. Sergei, too, gave ear. Then he spoke:

"After Olgerd's invasions, and even before, many children were orphaned in Russia and abandoned to cold and hunger. The monasteries sheltered and reared them, taught them crafts and how to follow the plough. They now till the soil for the benefit of the monasteries and receive their monthly ration of grain from the monastic granaries. We also supply them with clothes from our chests."

Dmitri's eyes travelled across the orchard fence to the cultivated fields beyond which stretched the forest. Within those dark woods villages nestled, and fields and clearings belonging to the monastery. Troitsa's estates had spread far around, thanks to liberal grants from princes and boyars, not to mention the indefatigable energy shown by the fraternity in persuading the freeholders to join the community or in urging the peasants to cultivate the monastic domains.

But whenever Dmitri passed by all activity ceased, and wherever he went Andrei followed him in silence. Sergei said:

"We are teaching him to paint ikons, for he is greatly gifted in the art and extremely painstaking."

Thus conversing, they reached the little pinewood porch outside Sergei's cell. This was Dmitri's first meeting with the famous painter, Andrei Rublev.

A sudden hush fell upon them as they stepped across the threshold.

A lamp burned before the ikons. The cell was low and built of logs. The air inside was permeated with the scent of incense, cypress, and some kind of aromatic oil. On a shelf were books, a clay inkwell, and a packet wrapped in red linen.

Through the low window, out of which one could only look when sitting down, was a view of the apiary, in its jungle of currant bushes, from which clusters of berries hung under the broad leaves, while shafts of sunlight penetrated through the leaves to the grass beneath. Here all was peace and light, far from the noise of battle and wailing, remote from the world's passions and travail. Dmitri's heart felt at rest.

"The hour of tribulation is again upon us, Father Sergei," said the Prince. "Whom shall we ask to pray for us? From whom can we expect counsel and exhortation? You alone guard our faith, and faith moveth mountains. . . ."

Sergei gazed at the ikon. Then he approached Dmitri and laid his hands on the Prince's shoulders.

"Be not alarmed, my son; be firm and full of courage. Go forward, fearlessly and with determination. Here, in my solitude, I have been thinking of all we learned of the state of the Horde and of your own preparations. The scales are tilting in our favour. Were we to wait longer the balance might be even more favourable. But over there, too, they seem to be aware in whose favour the scales are tilting, and are afraid lest the right moment to strike may slip through their fingers."

"What you say is true," answered Dmitri.

"The hour of the encounter is nigh and inevitable. There is nothing further to wait for. We shall not become any stronger by waiting, but may become weaker, for the foe would then have time to rally and prepare. The enemy will show no mercy, for if the Horde returns home without being victorious, that will spell its downfall. This is a decisive battle for us no less than for them. The earth will be soaked in blood; but, should we suffer a defeat, our whole life will come to an end. Neither towns nor monasteries will be left standing. In such a case, where shall we preserve our books, our wisdom, our learning, and our faith? Centuries of slavery will be our portion, and our Russian motherland will never rise again. Fear neither losses nor bloodshed. You bear the whole brunt of our country's fortune on your shoulders. It is a sombre and heavy burden. Put all your energies into the fight, my son, my lord, Dmitri Ivanovich, and be of good courage."

"Never shall I yield," answered the Prince. "It is obvious that this is not the time to think of giving in."

Sergei turned to Serpuhovski:

"You, too, Vladimir Andreich, hold fast. Now, brothers, let us pray. The hour is nigh. . . ."

Sergei took a step forward. All knelt down. Who were they to supplicate for mercy and support? From whom could they draw the necessary courage? If the people believed in them, if they themselves believed in victory, this belief would need strengthening. Every word of prayer spoken slowly by Sergei struck like a nail into the framework of that belief, consolidating it. They rose from their knees calm and invigorated. Theirs was a righteous cause. The times were full of evil, and it behoved them to cast out that evil once and for all.

Sergei took the red bundle from the shelf and unwrapped a large loaf of consecrated bread. He offered it to the Prince. All this while the wide-eyed

boy had been standing by the door drinking in every detail to store up as a life-long memory—the dim cell, and the humble prayer of the men who were about to march forth and overcome the foe.

Monks, pilgrims, and peasants had slowly been gathering round the cell. The crowd had been attracted by news of Dmitri's arrival. In their longing to see him they had settled themselves on the ground, or stood leaning on their staffs with their faces turned towards the little porch. An earthenware jug attached to a beam in this porch swayed gently to and fro, and there was a faggot of unchopped wood on the floor. An old pilgrim came up and, drawing a hatchet from beneath, set his idle hands to the task of chopping up the wood. But a monk rebuked him with severity, saying:

"Don't touch it. The reverend father does his own chopping. He does not warm his cell through another man's labour."

The sun shone with a sinister and transparent light. There was a tang of autumn in the air. Andrei appeared on the threshold and the people rose hurriedly to question the boy.

"Well, how was he?"

"He gave his blessing."

They waited in silence for Andrei to say something more. After a pause Andrei said again:

"He has given his blessing."

"God be praised," exclaimed the old pilgrim. "Time is long overdue. For years we've waited, fearing to begin."

A brief shower swept over, but the gathering paid no heed. The smell of musty apples rose from their soaked garments. It was still raining when Dmitri came out on to the porch. At sight of the crowd, he thought:

"They have forgathered here to receive the reverend father's blessing. I wonder where they've all come from."

The old pilgrim pushed his way to the forefront.

"Are you getting ready, my lord?"

Dmitri did not at once catch his meaning. The man persisted:

"Father, please take us with you."

Dmitri walked through the throng which pressed him from every side.

"We are to rally in Moscow. Go there."

Hardly were the words out of his mouth than all the bells pealed forth. Ikons and sacred banners were brought from the church. The monks intoned and the people took up the tune of the ancient battle-song. Leading the Prince's horse by the bridle-rein, they followed Dimitri and Sergei, who headed the procession with the other princes to the accompaniment of the bells and the fluttering of banners. The wind ruffled their unruly hair, leaves drifted down from the trees, while the rain pattered intermittently.

Thus they reached the well from which a narrow forest trail branched off from the road.

Here, in the presence of the assembled crowd, the Grand Prince knelt and craved Sergei's blessing anew. The prior kissed him thrice and blessed him.

"Now go. Be firm. God will not leave us to perish."

Dmitri looked at the faces of the ikons, which were besprinkled with rain, and from them he glanced at the human faces, which were all turned in his direction. He made but one answer, which included them all:

"I am going."

His steed was brought to him, and as he placed his foot in the stirrup he looked round to make sure that they had, every one of them, witnessed the

blessing bestowed on him by Sergei, the blessing for a victorious outcome of the battle. Were victory granted him it would mean that God was on Dmitri's side.

Chapter XLI

DMITRI GOES FORTH TO BATTLE

TOWN CRIERS WERE SHOUTING FROM PUBLIC SQUARES AND PORCHES :

"Unite all forces against the foe !"

Priests standing before their altars summoned the people to battle. Messengers scurried to every town and to every subject prince, whether of Rostov, Yaroslavl, or Bielozerk. In administrative hutments and at the gates of the city scribes read Dmitri's call to join the campaign.

It was harvesting time. The hay was already cut and the corn was about to be reaped. But the reapers passed their scythes into the hands of their women-folk, tightened their belts, threw their clothing over their shoulders, and in their bast shoes, which were still dusty from their native cornfields, made their way into the neighbouring towns for the mustering of the troops.

Forests, fogs, and rivers still divided the Russians from the enemy, yet levies were already marching to Moscow from distant principalities and towns. Cavalry and infantry were coming, led by the commanders. Short were the halts and long the marches. But behind the ridges of forest land Moscow was waiting for them. Each strove in his pride to be the first to arrive—Mozhai competing with Suzdal, Kostroma with Rostov, so as promptly to respond to Dmitri's call.

The walls of the Kremlin rose high, and higher than the walls soared the towers of stone. From these towers the whole surrounding country could be seen. The sound of arms—of local and incoming troops—filled the stronghold. Many different dialects smote the ear—the drawling speech of Vladimir, the singing cadence of Rostov, the rapid talk of Kostroma. Above the Kremlin, beacons had been lit and the air hummed with the drone of the vociferous multitude.

Soldiers and townsfolk cluttered the walls of the Kremlin so as to gaze out into the distance. Someone shouted from below :

"Anything to be seen ?"

"Ay, that there be."

"Who are they ?"

"Oh, obviously the Tverians."

"How can you tell ?"

"Because their arms look so antiquated."

The news was confirmed by the watchers in the turrets :

"We've cast aside arms of that sort long since."

The distance bristled with shining spears ; a horse's white star showed up as it stepped in front of the regiments. A scarlet banner gleamed with golden crosses.

From all the towns of Russia the soldiers were pouring into Moscow, and Moscow awaited their arrival with gates flung wide and the bridges down.

A rumour was abroad that the contingent from Novgorod was coming by the Troitsa Gate.

"Is it a large army ?"

"Fifteen hundred men. Maybe even more. Ivan Vasilievich is bringing them along, and he has his son Mitri with him and Toma his godson."

"That squinting fellow?"

"Ay. And there's Mitri Zaverezhsky and Misha Ponovlaiev and Yuri the Lame, and . . ."

"D'you think we could go and have a look at them?"

"What for? We've got the army from Tver to stare at."

As the converging armies drew nearer the outskirts of Moscow they stepped out more firmly and briskly. Floating from their spearheads were the sacred fabrics of their banners, swallow-tailed pennons spread out in the wind; unfurling slowly from their poles were the gold-embroidered standards of Tver which had so many times marched against Moscow.

"Is that Mihail himself leading them?"

"No. Mihail is lanky. This man is rather thick-set."

"Besides, he is younger."

"That's Prince Ivan of Holm, Mihail's nephew. We've had the better of him, too. Little did we expect to see him here in Moscow."

The Muscovites saw with disappointment that the men from Tver carried hunting-spears.

"Do they think we're going on a bear-hunt?"

"See, they've got axes."

"For chopping down trees or what?"

Dmitri had long ago done away with such primitive weapons as staves and battle-axes in his Moscow regiments.

"They are heavy and unmanageable. Their day is past."

"And the horse is white. It belongs, so I'm told, to the Prince of Tver, and is not just an ordinary charger."

The Muscovite boyars received the guest from Holm on the portico. As he reached the topmost step the princeling was embraced by Bobrok.

"Our sovereign lord Dmitri Ivanovich is at Troitsa," said he. "I was ordered to entertain you."

"We have not come here on a visit, Prince."

"Well spoken, Ivan Vsevolodovich. Is Lord Mihail Alexandrovich in good health?"

Such interest came strangely from Bobrok's lips, for he had many a time led the Muscovite troops against Tver.

"I thank you, Prince. He is in the best of health and sends you greetings. He told me to say that he is beseeching the Lord God that victory may be on our side."

As he rode to the rally in Moscow the Prince of Holm had been assailed by doubts. Would Dmitri receive him as befitted a prince or as a vassal? A pact for the campaign against the Tatars had been drawn up between Mihail of Tver and Dmitri of Moscow. A pact was a pact, and honour was honour. The Prince of Holm had been received honourably, so he hastened to conceal his misgivings and mingled with the other princes who had arrived before him.

"Dmitri has given me two receptions and would have been here in person had he not been at Troitsa. We've not reached here before the vassal princes. That is excellent. It is no honour for Tver to arrive before Mozhai."

Late that afternoon Dmitri returned. While still on the road he could see smoke rising above the walls of the Kremlin.

"They are mustering," said he.

He squared his shoulders, raised his head, confidently rode past the bridges

amid the joyful acclamations of the soldiers, and pushed his way through the throng towards his court. Each warrior was eager to catch a glimpse of the man who was destined to lead them to victory—or death.

The Bielozersk regiments arrived. With them came Prince Fedor Romanovich with his son Ivan. Their accoutrements delighted the Muscovites. So polished were these that they reflected the rays of the sun. . . . From beneath their coats of mail, of Varangian or Swedish make, their shirts gleamed white and were embroidered in pale blue. Many were the tall, broad-shouldered youths among the Bielozerskians. Their flaming brows met over their noses and drooped thickly above their eyes, which glinted green. Soft was their straw-coloured hair, and their beards were flaxen and curly, so that they looked as if spindrift from a lake had been entwined in the growth. Their forbears had sailed the Varangian Sea, had fought against the Swedes and had brought back English and Swedish dresses from these battles for their wives. Their grandfathers had populated the north after destroying the foe, and the women they had captured were taken lovingly to their hearths and homes. Passionate in love, these women had borne them fine lads, with broad shoulders and a glint of green in their eyes.

Fedor looked them over with satisfaction and led them through the Borovitski Gate. At the moment there entered by the Nikolski Gate a troop of monks marching with the peasants they had gathered from the monastery demesne.

Having entrusted the entertainment of the troops to his boyars, Fedor rode to the Prince's court. Here Dmitri's commanders met him and conducted him as far as the portico leading to the mansion. Stooping slightly, Fedor walked up the steps. He wore a white cloak lined with red and bordered with a wide band of gold brocade. His boots were blue, as was also his high cap. His son, remaining two paces behind him and likewise stooping slightly, passed up with him.

Halfway down the grand staircase Dmitri's boyars met Fedor and, turning, headed the procession up the stairs. In the vestibule the party was greeted by the Tarusa princes and Bobrok. Not for the first time the latter was struck by the resemblance between Prince Ivan and his own sovereign.

One of the Tarusa princes began to talk with Fedor in Greek, but the greying Belozerskian, who loved this language, reproved him, saying:

"This is no time for Greek, my lord. Russian has come into its own today."

Bobrok guided the northerners into a room where Dmitri stood with his arms flung wide. Fedor was soon in their welcoming embrace.

"Here he is. The hour has sounded."

"That it has, my lord."

Dmitri turned to young Ivan:

"I expect there's many a maiden weeping for you where you come from."

"No doubt," answered Fedor, with a smile towards his kinsman. "And the waters will rise in Bielozersk ere we return."

On any other occasion the Prince of Holm would have been affronted that the Prince of Bielozersk had been honoured with three receptions, for already in Kalita's day Bielozersk had been bought by Moscow. But the ruler of Holm had spent so lengthy a time in Moscow that he had forgotten the haughty demeanour of Tver. Moreover, his kith and kin were all around him, gathered together for Dmitri's sake. Why should the Prince of Holm make a fuss over so paltry a matter? Was not he a Russian? Certainly they had fought against one another in earlier days, but things were different then.

Before leaving Moscow for Troitsa, Dmitri had sent out scouting parties to

the steppes to observe the movements of the Horde. No news had reached him from the first patrol nor from Zahari Tiuchev.

On a radiant morning in August, Klim Polenin, Ivan Sviatoslav, and Grisha Sudok, with selected warriors from the second patrol, had assembled outside the walls of the Kremlin. Thoughtful and profoundly moved, the people of Moscow saw them off. What would the steppe reveal to this gallant little band? Would any return? Slipping the reins over their arms, the people escorted the scouts as far as the gates. There they shook hands with the young men and followed them with their eyes into the distance.

At noon a courier arrived from the Oka. A body of troops, he said, was marching from the borders of Lithuania; the Beliov militia was coming to join Dmitri, led by the butcher Vasili, with whom were his son Maxim and his grandsons Petr, Andrei, Mihail, and Alexander. Among the band there were likewise Fedor Migunov and the Belior coopers and oilpressers, six hundred men in all.

"It is not their number that pleases me so much but the fact that they are coming from the Lithuanian border and across Ryazan territory," said Dmitri. "Put your horse to the gallop and tell the folk that my instructions are not to come to Moscow but to descend lower down the Oka and to await us in Kolomna."

Cap in hand, the courier bowed, and replied:

"I thank you, my lord."

"You must have some food first, and so must your horse."

"My thanks, sire, but how can I stay to eat when there is work to be done? I shall have to hasten on my way."

"Hungry?"

"It is better to go hungry and free than with a bellyful and stripped naked."

"A sharp wit!"

"My lord, we are butchers. Without a sharp instrument we are lost."

"Very well, but you are going to eat something before you set off. Such is my will. What sort of a war would it be if I made my men fight with nothing under their belts?"

All manner of lodgings were found for the troops which were already in Moscow. Some were put up in cottages, others in monasteries, others in the crypts of churches, yet others in the courtyards. Moscow had been storing great quantities of food in expectation of this huge army. But when the Beliovian courier, at Dmitri's command, went to seek a meal before setting forth on the road again, he had to refuse a great number of invitations. The Novgorodians begged him to partake of their victuals; the Suzdalians pressed him to sit at their board, the men from Ruza and Mozhai asked him to their table; while the Belozerskians offered him mead. Then there were the folk from Kostroma, Pereslavl and Vladimir with their own special delicacies—not to mention the Muscovites themselves. Some of the people regaled him so sumptuously that when he went to taste the soup made by the Surozhavians he had not even strength to raise the spoon to his mouth. He ate merely to obey Dmitri's orders, but even the mead lacked flavour. So he hastened on his way.

Dawn was serenely breaking when on the tenth of August the horns sounded from the towers. The commanders mounted their chargers, the banners were unfurled, and the troops marched forth from the Kremlin gates. So vast was the army that it had to find an exit through three of the stronghold's gates, the Nikolsk, the Frolov, and through the Constantine and Helen Gate. Priests accompanied the army bearing ancient and revered ikons. All through the day the troops poured out through the three gates.

Besides the princes there were also the commanders Timofei Valuievich of Vladimir, Ivan Rodionovich of Kostroma, Punia Solovei of Ruza, Andrei Sevkisovich of the Pereyaslavl regiment. Altogether the soldiers who issued forth that day numbered over a hundred and fifty thousand men. So huge an army had never been seen in Russia before.

When he had seen his warriors off, Dmitri returned to his Kremlin. He rode straight to the Cathedral of the Archangel and entered the nave under the dark and echoing vault. Here, beneath heavy tombstones, lay the bones of the men who had begun the work he intended to complete—Ivan Kalita, Semion the Proud, and Dmitri's father, Ivan. Bowing thrice at this sepulchre, Dmitri touched the paving with outstretched fingers.

"Father, I am speaking to thee. We are on our way. If thou art with God, pray to Him that He send us His aid. Though our army is great, that of the foe is great also. . . ."

He stood for a while as if he were listening. Then suddenly and as though in despair, he bent low above the tomb and, vexed that no answer had been vouchsafed, he called aloud :

"We are setting forth, father. Dost thou hear?"

He shuddered at a gentle and subdued voice addressed him :

"God be with you, my lord."

He turned brusquely, and there, in all humility, stood the priest Sofroni, the Grand Prince's chronicle-writer.

"Will you permit me, my lord, to accompany you?"

"They'll cut your head off over there, father."

"They will have no hair to clutch hold of," answered Sofroni jocularly.

Dmitri smiled.

"Go and get ready," he said.

Evdokia also came into the cathedral. She stood at her husband's side in the middle of the fane, not at the place allotted to the Prince on ordinary occasions. How lofty and empty was this church! Only at the altar were the clergy offering up prayers for the enterprise. She looked like a little girl, tear-stained and silent, obedient and meek, as she stood beside Dmitri.

At that same hour the troops were marching by three roads to Kolomna. Vladimir Serpuhovski led his regiments along the Brashevski road; the Bielozerski troops marched by the Bolvanski highway; Dmitri's men were making for Kotel. They had to march by various ways for the simple reason that they were too numerous to go by one single road.

At dawn the next day Evdokia saw Dmitri off after a night of weeping, exhortations, and prayers. Her ladies-in-waiting stayed behind. She alone went with her husband to where his horse stood.

"Do not grieve, Evdokia," said Dmitri. "I am afraid myself. It is such a vast undertaking. . . ."

Silently he stroked her bent head. She was in suspense, but what could he say to her?

"I am leaving the town to the care of Fedor Andreich. He will defend you. Indeed, there is none to defend you against."

"Come back to me alive."

"That will depend on results."

"I shall be lost without you. . . ."

"Courage, my dear."

He handed her over to her ladies, who were hardly less heavy of heart than

the Princess. Each of them was married and each had a husband who had gone to the wars.

Dmitri took with him ten Surozhian merchants so that these men who were used to swift travel might bear through Russia and the world the urgent tidings of the campaign. They were Vasili Kapets, Sidor Olferev, Kostiantin Volk, Kuzum Kuvir, Semion Korotonos, Mihail and Dmitri Saraev, Timofei Vosiakov, Dmitri Chernoi, and Ivan Shiha. The Grand Prince's stirrup flashed. He reined in his charger for a moment, then galloped away into the unknown.

Evdokia stood for a while on the green sward of the courtyard listening to the sudden hush which pervaded the Kremlin.

The drawbridges were raised, the portcullis lowered. The gates were closed. A forgotten horse neighed.

Evdokia sought refuge in her own chamber.

The rhythmic tolling of bells filled the air. The Court ladies hovered about her and proposed spending the night in her vestibule so as to lighten her sadness and to make the weary hours of darkness seem shorter. But Evdokia protested: "No, I shall go to the cathedral."

She made her way thither, to find herself among hundreds of women whose eyes were swollen with weeping, and though a passage was made through which she could pass, she remained standing among them to weep and to pray. This great communion of grief brought her some comfort. Many were the alms she distributed that night, for she wanted to help everyone—those who had children and those who were sick. All had been left without support, and loneliness is a hard burden for women to bear. The times were ruthless, hard, and gloomy. One lives, but perpetually one's eyes search the distance for a sign of dust rising from the plain, or the enemy appear and carry off or destroy all one holds dear. You live from hour to hour, and cannot believe that dawn will inevitably break on the morrow. You fear to smile lest you be tempting fate to send you sorrows and misfortunes. All were borne down with heaviness and fear. And now husbands, sons, and brothers had gone forth to cast an unbearable yoke from off the neck of Russia.

Chapter XLII

THE HORSE AND THE RYAZAN TANNERS

A TALL, DARK-BAÏ HORSE WAS LED ACROSS THE PRINCE'S GREEN COURTYARD, SO that Oleg might gaze his fill at this new acquisition. Its long tail rippled round its hindquarters, its head stretched eagerly forward as it stepped behind the groom who was leading it. Only the small pointed ears and quivering withers disclosed its excitement.

"A pity the beast is not a trifle lighter in colour," Oleg reflected. This horse would have to take the lead of the other princes' chargers. He wanted them to envy him such a mount.

"Swift of foot he is," said the groom jubilantly.

"I have no intention of riding to harriers with it," answered Oleg sharply.

The horse had been brought from the Horde, which had acquired it elsewhere.

"I wonder if it has a noble carriage," mused Oleg. He did not feel that the animal showed enough pride of gait.

"It is rather long in the body," grumbled the Prince. But he decided to test its paces in the clearing.

"Saddle it," he ordered.

Soldiers, some of the boyars, and the Princess scanned the field from a high window, with young Fedor taking the front place; servants, everyone was looking at the horse.

"A regular marvel!"

By now the horse was caparisoned in red beneath a green saddle from Shemakha. The feel of the bridle and rein made the beast rear. It raised its head and became skittish, trying to shoulder the groom aside.

"Stop that!"

"Nobody need feel ashamed to ride into Moscow on such a beast," thought Oleg. "I shall have to ask Mamai not to burn down Moscow. Let him deduct from me the value of the city. If he wants to plunder, let him, but there's no need to destroy the town. I shall tell him so."

Boyar Afanasi Mironov rode hurriedly up to the gates, dismounted, and threw the reins to a page. He himself went on to the Prince's Court. The page lashed the weary horse to the picket-rope, where many others were already tied up. The boyar's serving-men and pages sat round the fence chatting to one another and playing I-Spy and other games while their masters were waiting on the Prince's pleasure.

Afanasi Mironov entered, agitated but firm.

"Good health to you, my lord Oleg Ivanovich. Prince Dmitri sends you greetings."

"Did he read my letter?"

"Two days went by before he summoned me. The letter was delivered into his hands before that."

"Well?"

"When I appeared upon the scene he was striding about the courtyard inspecting horses—like you today."

"Is he preparing for flight?"

"It looked so. His face was stern as he walked about."

"Well?"

"I bowed to him, while thinking to myself: 'It does not befit you to receive a messenger in the stables.' So I gave him a mere sketch of a bow. He did not even look at me."

"Well, go on . . ."

"I bow to your Prince," said he. Those are his precise words. He did not call you by your name and patronymic. As regards giving help, he said: 'Tell him to seek pasture at Mamai's hands; but I shall defend Russia myself. Let your Prince defend Ryazan. I was not expecting a letter from him, neither am I prepared to help him. I shall certainly not have leisure now to lend him any assistance!'"

"What? D'you mean to imply that he imagined I was asking help from him?"

"Well, my lord, you are the best judge of that. It is not for him to lean on you for support."

"Has he made up his mind to resist the Horde?"

"Indeed he has."

"Really to resist?"

"The troops were beginning to muster while I was still there."

"Were there many of them?"

"They were coming in crowds, from all sides, through all the gates. Even the Borovitsk Gate was not shut until night, and through it the militia was arriving."

"Whom has he gathered together?"

"Every Russian, from all over Russia."

"Ah!"

Oleg fell a-brooding.

The Ryazan troops were preparing to go to Pronsk and from thence in due course he meant to take them to Dubok. There, on the upper reaches of the Don, Mamai would meet him. Or he, Oleg, would meet the Tatar khan.

At that moment, heading ten Ryazanites, Klim entered. Oleg had driven Klim from his court on account of the night when Kyrill ran away. He had not thought it worth while to punish the man, and now, perhaps, he was anxious to please his master. But Oleg often thought of Klim, and invariably with hatred. Since then Klim had grown accustomed to life among the tanners, for he remembered his old trade. Added to this, he made use of all that he had learned in the Horde, so that he was held in high esteem by his fellow craftsmen.

A soldier went to meet the group of Ryazanites. Coming back he said to a boyar:

"These Ryazanites wish to speak with the Prince."

Klim, with the deputation, stood a little way off, waiting.

"What do they want?" asked Oleg fiercely, for he had overheard the talk between Kobiak and the soldier.

Klim stepped forward and bowed.

"We have come, my lord, with a petition."

"Well, what is it?"

"We have heard that the Prince of Moscow is calling his men to arms so as to fight the Horde. Ryazan has sent us to inquire whether you wish and whether we are strong enough to participate in the campaign."

"Against whom?"

"The Horde."

The court was full of people, every one of them all ears. The room resounded as if an alarm-bell had been struck. Each stroke made by Klim was heard distinctly. Oleg had no sword by him or he would have cut Klim in twain, and that would have served as his answer. But so many ears had heard and Moscow was near by. Biting his beard, Oleg turned away from Klim, and, letting his gaze travel over the roofs, he replied nonchalantly:

"Is that all you have to ask me?"

"We await your answer, my lord."

"We are collecting our troops. Weapons we have in plenty. But whether we shall fight—time will show."

"That's just the point, my lord. This is no time for hanging fire. Russia is determined to fight."

"And the Tatars will burn down Ryazan. Have you forgotten?"

"Precisely, I have not forgotten. Should they burn the city we shall build it up again. But if they burn Russia, shall we ever rise from the blow?"

"If I issue orders, you will rise."

"You say there are weapons, my lord. But will there be anyone left to bear those arms?"

"Has it escaped your memory that Moscow beat us?"

"Are you referring to the time at Skornishchev?" asked one of the men who had come with Klim. "We all remember that they beat us then. They beat us

for a just cause, for a Russian cause. They beat us because their cause was righteous."

"What's that you say?"

"Have you not ears to hear withal, my lord?"

Oleg turned about and was on the point of beckoning to his soldiers, when he pulled himself together again. If he were to beat Dmitri, his intentions must be kept secret, for Moscow had long ears. . . .

"When I need your services, I shall summon you. Go!"

But the group of Ryzanites stood their ground.

"Well?"

"Give your orders first," insisted Klim calmly.

"This is not a matter for minds like yours to grapple with"

"The people, my lord, live on their minds."

"And what, pray, have they on their mind?"

"We ask to be sent against the Horde, and will not fight with the Horde. That's what we have to say."

"Go hence, and tell them that they will fight whomsoever I shall lead them against."

"We shall see, my lord."

But at this the boyars, looking askance at Oleg, made for the envoys of the people and hustled them away.

The Prince was pale as he mounted the steps.

"What about the horse, my lord?" asked the groom.

Oleg scowled as he looked down into the courtyard. The Ryzanites were passing through the gate. Without, more people had gathered to await the answer. Among them there was a jostle of women. A veritable multitude thronged the precincts. Grinding his teeth, Oleg muttered hoarsely:

"Get the horse ready. I shall need him."

"What sort of saddle shall I fit him with?"

"A Circassian one of silver. And sling saddle-cloths over the white horse. I shall need them both."

There was but one place where he could hide from his town: in the stone-vaulted cave of his home. The mansion stood on high ground overlooking the roofs of the city where the houses were of stout roughly-carved beams. The roofs huddled together beneath Oleg's windows. Raising his eyes, he watched the transparent clouds trailing across the sky.

"I wonder if there's going to be a fog?"

His game leg began to ache. He rubbed it angrily. But how can a man brush away pain as though it were dust?

The horse neighed, pawing the floor of the dark loose-box with its unshod feet. The steps of the portico were deserted. Those who had forgathered there had already forgotten about the horse and were talking over the bold speech of the tanners, passing judgment on it, spreading it through the town, through the outskirts, through the whole principedom, through the length and breadth of Russia.

Klim walked composedly away. That night, before dawn, he and his companions would leave Ryazan.

"They say men are coming from all our towns. We shall not be the first to arrive."

"That remains to be seen."

"We've heard that Mamai is waiting."

"That can be attended to anon."

"But have we not already had a foretaste?"

"What matters it that we have to witness the same things again?"

In the evening Oleg received the news that the Muscovite boyar Tiuchev had ridden through Pronsk.

"What's his game?"

"He is on his way to see Mamai."

"So it would seem that Dmitri had sent an envoy to sue for peace. But why go through Pronsk?"

"He called there, so 'tis said, to see his sister."

"Has he a sister there?"

"I'm told that he searched for her there but failed to find her. He walked through the town looking at our troops and inquired after you. Then he said: 'Against whom are these troops to march?'"

"Dmitri's got wind of my doings," thought Oleg to himself. But he never uttered a word. He had just sufficient strength to limp to his couch. As usual with him, he wanted to be left alone because rage was gnawing at his heart.

Chapter XLIII

TIUCHEV'S MISSION

WHILE TIUCHEV WAS IN PRONSK HE GATHERED AMPLE EVIDENCE THAT OLEG HAD become a renegade to the Russian cause.

Lean, and neat in his black coat trimmed with white fur, and patches of grey in his thick black beard, Moscow's ambassador walked through Pronsk with firm tread. He stopped to chat with the troopers, questioning them about Mamai. Then, just as the gates were going to be closed at nightfall, he and all his followers quitted Pronsk.

He rode across Rias Plain towards the Don.

Tiuchev had already been informed that Mamai had encamped amid the upper reaches of the Don. But, leaving the khan in his rear and carefully avoiding the Tatar scouts, he continued on his way southward. Thus he rode for six days.

At last the glow of camp-fires no longer lit up the skyline and the distant sound of droves of horses died away. Tiuchev emerged on to the open highway, wheeled his horse about and, making as though to overtake the Horde, cantered swiftly to the north. On the very first day of this journey he was detained by Tatar horsemen. He gave his name and was then led to see the captain, who asked:

"How can you be coming from Moscow when you are riding towards that city?"

"I have been trying to overtake you. Nobody in Moscow suspected that the great khan could have advanced so far. So it came about that I missed you."

The captain ordered that Tiuchev be taken to the senior commander. Tiuchev produced his pass to the Horde and Dmitri's letter.

As he was being led to the captain and then to the commander, Tiuchev had time to observe the Horde. First he and his escort passed through flocks of sheep so gigantic that the whole steppe as far as eye could see appeared to be carpeted with dusty sheepskins.

Later they passed through big droves of camels, then herds of horned cattle. At rare intervals they saw queer little donkeys that looked somehow like hares. The last to appear were the droves of horses with their smell of sweat and urine—a smell dear to the heart of a warrior accustomed to campaigning. There were no boyars in Moscow who had not been on campaigns, and Tiuchev revelled in the choking, smoky stench of horses. The Tatar droves grazed placidly as Tiuchev rode by. Through his interpreters he asked his simple-minded guards as to the number of beasts and learnt other figures, too.

It had taken Tiuchev six days to ride from Pronsk past these herds. Now that he was in their midst he got along faster. When he reached the transport waggons there came from all sides the drumming of tambourines, shouts, yells, children's wails. He was surrounded by carts laden with weapons, families, and stores. The overcrowded transport train had evidently been encamped here for some considerable time, for the shafts were raised in the air, while garbage and ashes cluttered round the wheels. Fires smoked under cooking-pots, and warriors sat amid their families. All eyes were glued to the Muscovites. The Tatars were inquisitive but good-natured, and passed remarks as the strangers went by.

Tiuchev, accompanied by his own followers, the Tatar guard, and groups of onlookers who wished to gratify their curiosity, pursued his way up the Don towards the khan's encampment. The transport waggons now gave way to the bachelors' quarters. Lying at full length on felt rugs, the warriors sang, played on deep-toned balalaikas, crooned dreamily, dined, or slept while exposing their sweating backs to the rays of the sun. There was every indication of their having been here a long time with no intention of an early move. All the same, Tiuchev noticed that the customary order of the Horde had been altered: herds and transport in the rear; warriors in the forefront.

"You'll have noticed that they are prepared," said Tiuchev to one of his companions.

"So it would seem," answered the other.

The Tatars proposed that Dmitri's envoys should rest and present themselves to Mamai on the following day.

For long into the night Tiuchev lay in the open beneath the stars holding counsel with his companions. Camp fires flared up in every direction, the smoke spreading like a flat mist in the serene sky or hanging thick and lurid, a cloud lit up from below by the flickering light of fires.

The guards brought the Muscovites a large cauldron filled with mutton stew. Tiuchev, feeling hungry after the day's ride, took out a hot, fat piece of meat and remarked gaily to his followers:

"Eat! Maybe 'tis our last meal."

He refused the offer of a felt tent and they all lay down in the dark nocturnal grass with the clear starlight as a covering. As he was falling asleep, Tiuchev murmured to himself:

"Sleep, Zahari; sleep, boyar Tiuchev. Who knows but that you will never sleep again?"

Just before dawn he was awakened by the cold. He looked around him at his sleeping friends, at the pale-green sky, at the plain which was grey with dew, at the woods veiled in blue mists, and he sighed:

"It will be sad to leave all this."

He shoved a warm coat under his shoulders and answered himself:

"Nothing can be done about it, Tiuchev."

Thus saying, he fell asleep again.

Later in the morning they were roused. More riding lay ahead of them, for Mamai's camp had been pitched at some distance.

On the bank of the Krasivaia Mecha, on the spot where that quiet river pours its waters into the Don, the Tatars had occupied three huts, one of which had been specially decorated as Mamai's dwelling-place.

The nights were too cold for sleeping in tents. Carpets had therefore been spread on the earth floor of the smoke-begrimed hut, and silken coverlets had been flung over the couch. All day long Mamai lay shivering on that couch. The blue-grey skies of Russia looked as unfriendly as the withered grasses on the steppe. It was preferable to lie with his feet well tucked in, examining his rings, and listening to Bernaba.

The Genoese was reciting Persian poetry and translating as he went along. Mamai's nephew, Tiuliu-beg-khan, reclined on the stove, blinking his mole-like eyes and listening to the Persian text—for he understood the language. A light silk rug with a small design hung down from beneath Tiuliu-beg and concealed the brown clay stove. A loose coat of thick striped silk, woven in Samarkand, wrapped Mamai's frail body about.

His palms were dyed red with henna and were podgy, not slim as he would have wished. His heels, too, were dyed red and his legs were short and bandy, not white and elegantly shaped like those of the Persian kings. Allah, in moulding Mamai's frail body, had endowed it with ambition for victories, power, and wealth. And it required every effort—cunning, cruelty, flattery, and fearlessness—to achieve power, victory, and riches. Now that these were within his grasp, it needed little more effort on his part to gain the same kind of world domination as that which Ghenghis had attained.

Moreover, he was disturbed, remembering that a certain Amir Timur was clever, cruel, and invincible. He was said to be advancing from the south. Still, the moment for crossing swords with him had not yet arrived. Let Timur break his sword in Persia. The time would come when, having dealt with Russia, Mamai would be in a position to plunge his sword into Timur's back from the north.

The ageing and decrepit khan, with his wisp of a beard, sat in the dark and decaying hut which was filled with the stench of drying putties and the sweat of weary men who had slept there before him. At night he was tormented by the probing antennae of some huge insects. He wondered with fear in his heart whether their sting might be deadly. He learned that the Russ called them "*karakhans*", which means "black princes".

He lay wakeful at night in expectancy of Jagiello's and Oleg's contingents. This was what he tarried for. Otherwise his thoughts were preoccupied with the vast country stretching ahead of him. For one hundred and fifty years the khans had held sway over it. Like a pestilence, Batu-khan had swept across it. For a century the tax-collectors had lived in its towns, collecting tribute on behalf of the Horde; for a hundred years they had been draining away its life-blood to the very last drop. The warriors of many a khan had raided and plundered it, and had taken prisoners whenever the time came to settle accounts. By these raids the khans had paid their fighting men and spared their own treasury. They burned towns, yet the number of these did not diminish. Again and again it was necessary to sack them and to reduce them to ashes at the cost of thousands of men's lives. People were slaughtered. Yet the population did not decline. On the contrary, the settlements spread farther and farther afield and the population of the towns grew. As was the case in the days of Batu-khan, so now Mamai was confronted with a great people, a large enemy force, wealthy cities, and endless highways.

It was a week since Mamai had sent envoys to Dmitri of Moscow. The Grand Prince's suspicions had to be allayed so that the Muscovite would be taken by surprise when Mamai crossed the Oka and dealt his blow on Moscow territory. Should he prove successful the lash would be needed rather than the sword.

Mamai had also sent a message to Jagiello bidding him hasten. A messenger had arrived from Oleg. An envoy from Dmitri was awaiting Mamai's pleasure.

The night had been calm and mild, but in the morning the wind was again blowing from Moscow, a mist shrouded the countryside and a light fall of snow carpeted the ground.

Tiulu-beg slid from the stove. Commanders, murzas, the descendants of khans, interpreters, began to assemble in the hut. On the outside of the wall a minstrel, marching with the troops, was crooning a song, his face turned towards the rain. It was an endless song about feather-grass waving on the steppes, of droves of horses on the plain, of the far-off city of Peiping, which rises on seven terraces above the ground and penetrates an equal depth below the earth; he grew lyrical in praise of Manas.

Oleg's messenger was ushered in.

A man of bulky girth crossed the threshold, stooping ingratiatingly under the lintel. He bent low in turn to Mamai and the assembled warriors.

The hut was by now crowded to bursting and smelt musty. There was barely enough room in front of Mamai for this burly Ryazanite.

When Oleg's letter was handed to the khan he did not accept it, but ordered the interpreter to inquire:

"Does my servant, Oleg of Ryazan, intend to present himself with his braves?"

The Ryazanite boyar screwed up his eyes respectfully and again proffered the scroll on his outspread palms.

"Everything you wish to know is written here, my sovereign and tsar."

"This is the fifth time he has written to me. I need warriors, not letters. I shall turn Ryazan land into pasturage. Tell him so."

"Father tsar, be not angry. Oleg Ivanovich bows low to you. He will be here in no time."

"Why is he not here already?"

"And if you desire to graze your herds on our lands, do so, benefactor. We are ever happy and willing to be of service to you. We love you."

Mamai burst out angrily:

"Where is his army?"

The boyar flinched before Mamai's glaring eyes.

"He has collected plenty of weapons and other arms. But I must frankly confess that there are no men to use them. We have run short of warriors."

"I shall wait no longer."

"But, my lord, it is your own scimitars which have put us in this plight."

"Then why did he brag and promise us his assistance?"

The boyar fell on his knees, bowing to the ground, vowing that Oleg would bring what troops he could muster without delay.

"They are already on the march from Pronsk to Skopin. And from Skopin to Dubok is but a stone's-throw. They'll be here in no time."

The man was near fainting.

Mamai sprang from his silken couch, thrusting his bare feet into the green embroidered slippers which were in readiness on the carpet. He shouted:

"Tell your prince that if he does not come at once I shall issue a summons to him and have him flogged."

The Ryazanite crawled from the hut on his belly. Then he made haste to inform Oleg of the khan's high displeasure.

Mamai's wrath was still rising when Tiuchev was ushered in. The Muscovite entered with his own interpreter and, without saluting, stood waiting for the murzas to make way for him. When they had done so he bowed calmly and inquired :

"Khan, will you read my great sovereign's message yourself, or shall I tell you what he says?"

Tiuchev's interpreter translated this speech word for word and even imitated Tiuchev's severity of tone.

"What does he write about?"

"He sends you his greetings. He wonders why you are on the march. What more do you require? He would offer you more, but he possesses nothing. He relies on your bounty. He inquires after your health."

Mamai snatched the slipper from off his foot, revealing his hennaed heel, and bellowed :

"Here, take this to Dmitri. That's my bounty. I present my cast-off slipper to the messenger of his high and mighty glory."

"Keep your slipper for a little while longer, khan. My sovereign lord, the Grand Prince Dmitri Ivanovich, has commanded me to offer you gifts. Give orders that they are to be received."

The envoy's calm took Mamai by surprise, but his wrath continued unabated. He said peremptorily to his murzas :

"Go and take them. And buy yourselves plenty of whips with the proceeds. All Dmitri's gold and silver will soon be mine. I shall divide his territories among you. As for Dmitri himself, I shall make him herdsman to my camels."

The khan was suddenly interrupted by Tiuchev :

"I have no time to waste listening to your instructions to your murzas, khan. Speak to me instead."

"What I told them applies to you."

"Methinks, khan, your camels will freeze to death in our land. And so, too, will your herdsmen. You, likewise, will freeze. As for Moscow's gold, you will never bite it out of the ice. Translate my words exactly as I have spoken them."

But the interpreter hung back.

"What did he say?" asked Mamai.

"He said it might be rather too cold for your camels on our pastures. Also that you might catch cold yourself."

"How comes it that he understood what I was saying to my murzas?"

Tiuchev brushed aside the interpreter and repeated his words in Tatar.

Instantly he was beset by the murzas and held fast by the shoulders.

Mamai, whose anger never lasted for long, addressed Tiuchev personally :

"How dare you speak to me thus?"

"I speak on the Grand Prince's behalf, not on my own. But even on my tongue his speech sounds firm."

"I perceive that you serve him faithfully."

"Command your murzas to cease twisting my arms, it impedes conversation."

They eased their grip on him, but still held his arms.

"Where did you pick up our language?"

"I spent six years in the Horde with my father."

"What was your business there?"

"We noted your activities, ever since you finished off Hidir-khan."

"What have you learnt by your stay?"

"To keep my sword well sharpened."

"Not a bad piece of knowledge."

"Quite useful, in fact."

"I note that you serve Dmitri fearlessly."

"How else can a man serve?"

"And who is Dmitri? Why do you serve him?"

"He is loved by the people because he loves his people. He is brave and wise, stern but merciful. He has no respect for you. You have yourself seen him and will see him again if you live long enough. So I serve him."

"Won't you throw in your lot with me? I set a high value on steadfast servants."

"Permit me first to accomplish the task Dmitri Ivanovich set me and fulfil my mission to you."

"I grant you this boon. Go back to Dmitri. My men will see him before you do. But you must carry my message to him first. Tell him that I, too, am firm of purpose. Tell him that he must pay the same amount of tribute as did his grandsires to Cheni-beg khan. If he consents I shall go away. If he refuses he can expect no mercy."

"I shall give him your message. Have I your permission to depart?"

"And when you return will you enter my service?"

"As I said before, first allow me to carry out Dmitri's mission."

"Go, but remember that I am prepared to receive you."

Mamai watched Tiuchev as he strode from the presence with assured gait and head erect, fastidiously avoiding contact with the restless murzas.

"He will make a worthy servant," reflected Mamai. "Especially for missions to foreign parts."

The khan fully expected that he would be in need of just such men to send out in his name to the whole wide world.

Five murzas, the descendants of khans, in whose veins flowed the blood of Ghenghis, and who were being trained as foreign envoys, were ordered by Mamai to accompany Tiuchev as far as Moscow and there to deliver his written reply to Dmitri. However high his words might be in conversation, the strong language Mamai used was mainly intended to intimidate the Muscovites. As a matter of fact Mamai would far rather have received the old tribute without having to fight. He would have been well content to ruin Russia by exacting tribute, instead of by making war on her.

In the letter which the murzas were to carry to Dmitri, Mamai wrote:

You must be aware that the lands you govern are not yours but my own dependencies. If you are too young to appreciate this, come to my court and I shall appoint you to another task. . . .

No sooner had Tiuchev left, however, than the khan raged anew. How dared the man speak thus?

"Overtake the Ryazan messenger," he said furiously.

"The Ryazanite?"

"Yes, overtake him and give him a good hiding so that he can tell Oleg what our whips are like, and make him hurry."

Several warriors gladly availed themselves of this opportunity to dash out of the hut.

On the other side of the wall the singer still crooned about the river Manas. A large crowd had assembled around Mamai's hut to listen to the minstrel and to be in the vicinity of the khan. Bernaba strolled away to join the Genoese infantry. It was still drizzling and the grass had become slippery.

By Gusini ford, Tiuchev was met by Dmitri's second outpost. Ivan Sviatoslav was well known to Tiuchev. No sooner had the two Russians met than Tiuchev summoned the five murzas, drew forth the khan's letter, and silently tore it to shreds.

"How dare you?" shouted one of the Tatars, unsheathing his scimitar.

"Are you for a fight?" asked Tiuchev, feigning surprise. He ordered his guards to bind the envoys. Four of them were beheaded on the spot. The fifth was unloosed from his bonds and, while his hands were considerably held, he received a severe thrashing.

"Can you stand on your feet?" asked Tiuchev.

"Yes."

An additional dose was thereupon ordered.

"Can you crawl?"

The Tatar did not reply.

"Get him into his clothes again."

The murza was dressed. Again Tiuchev asked:

"Can you crawl?"

Squirming with fury, the murza answered haughtily:

"I can."

"Then crawl back to your Mamai and tell him of the way we Russians desert our country to enter foreign service."

Leaving the five murzas in the cold, wet grass, Tiuchev made all speed to rejoin Dmitri.

Chapter XLIV

DMITRI'S HOST LEAVES KOLOMNA

THE PEOPLE OF MOSCOW ROUSED THEMSELVES BEFORE DAYLIGHT AND POURED into the streets. While it was still dark they eagerly ranged themselves along the walls or went far out along the roads to watch Dmitri's army striding off to war and to bid Dmitri farewell.

From Valui's estate, stealing by dusky lanes, went the Ryazan maiden martyr, her face covered with a rough shawl. She hoped to catch a glimpse of that warrior who had once come to her from the Kremlin, for whom she yearned and who haunted her dreams.

She took up her position by the wayside, but the road was wrapped in gloom. Though she stood by the wayside the ribbon of road lay empty. Only at sunrise did the advance company march past. The warriors glowed as if drenched in blood, and their weapons clanged like sword upon sword. But the one whom Sanka sought was not in their midst. Absorbed in reverie, they urged their mounts forward with compressed lips, holding their breath for battle curses and, maybe, thinking of their own imminent death. Mutely and with tears Moscow watched them go.

The grass sparkled with gold in the morning light when the roar of the crowds sounded from afar and rolled nearer and nearer. Bestriding a white

charger, clad in shining armour like the rising sun, with helmet drawn low over his brow, tall, black-bearded and stern, the Grand Prince of Russia rode past.

"Lord'a mercy!" cried Sanka, all confusion. Then she murmured, awestruck: "It cannot be he!"

On an impulse she cast off the shawl which concealed her scars and called aloud in the clearest, most wonderful voice in all Russia:

"'Tis he! My God, 'tis he! Look, ye people, it is these scars he is going forth to avenge!"

Her voice reached Dmitri.

He reined in his charger sharply and, looking over his shoulder, met her gaze. His face turned pale, he smiled at her and waved his hand, to the thunderous accompaniment of the people's cheers. She dashed forward, intending to lay hold of his gilded stirrup, but already other steeds with many a glittering stirrup came hustling along the road. All these men were setting out to avenge her wounds.

Motionless, she followed them with her eyes, facing the east where the sky was aflame. She crumpled the shawl which she had snatched from her head, and her face, boldly uplifted and illuminated by the sun, was no less beautiful than of old. No need any longer to hide it with a shawl, for who could feel ashamed of such scars?

Regiment after regiment passed her by: the troops of the Grand Prince; the Moscow militia; strange warriors encased in armour from head to foot, with scarlet plumes waving from their helms and weapons clanking; horses neighing and prancing; dust rising in a thick cloud; bursts of song. And still the people clamoured and the women cried and wailed, while company on company went past her. But she did not weep or lament, for she was light of heart, though for ever alone.

The great Russian army advanced by three roads, for beaten tracks were narrow in the forests.

Fedor Bielozerski led his men by the Bolvanovka road in the direction of Serpuhov, making for Tula. From thence he was to branch off for Kashira.

Dmitri's regiments advanced to Kotel, making for Kashira, from whence he intended to take a by-road to Shubinka.

Vladimir directed his Moscow detachments along the Brashevo highway, crossed the Moscow river at this town, and moved on to the Lopasnia.

On August 15, the armies reached Kolomna.

This town was seething like a cauldron with numerous militia units waiting the arrival of the Moscow contingents. Forty thousand men had been raised by the Olgerdovich brothers, Andrei and Dmitri. Prince Eletski had rallied with his regiments; the commander, Prince Juri Mescherski, with his. There was also a multitude of smaller units—the Nizhni-Novgorod merchants had issued from their suburbs without asking preliminary permission from their own prince; there were men from Beliov; and a messenger arrived from Ryazan sent by Klim. It seemed as though not a township throughout Russia had failed to dispatch its quota of men, however insignificant, to the rallying-place. Others still hurried on their way, and among these was Klim.

Early on the morning of August 20 the bells rang out and the various commanders rode forth to meet Dmitri. The encounter took place on the banks of the river Severka.

Thanks be to God, the stream was small and shallow! Dmitri's white charger strode across. The Prince's gilded armour was reflected in the waters.

On the farther bank Dmitri dismounted to embrace his leaders. From now on they marched inseparable in glory and in death.

Gerasim, the bishop, welcomed the Grand Prince at the town gates with ikons and singing, while at the churches which had no bells the vergers beat a frantic tattoo on copper gongs. And the thousand-voiced army roared its welcome, rejoicing that the hour had come.

When the acclamations had died down, and after he had replied to all the speeches of welcome, Dmitri withdrew to a room for a quiet talk with a small circle of intimate friends.

Even Bobrok, who was habitually taciturn and secretive, was shaken out of his composure. It fell to him to organize the army for the campaign, since defeat in such an enterprise would spell the end of everything—of Russia, her cities, of life itself.

Now and again Bobrok looked searchingly at Dmitri. He had a deep affection for his big brother-in-law. But he wanted to be sure that Dmitri could stand the test at this critical moment, whether he realized the enemy's strength, whether he would firmly establish his position.

Dmitri turned to Bobrok and answered with a silent, grave, and absent-minded glance.

Bobrok was not fully reassured.

It was decided to review the troops next morning. The commanders dispersed to make ready their men. Dmitri retired to rest after the long journey, while Bobrok summoned his two first cousins, the Olgerdovich brothers, to a private talk.

"Dmitri is fond of you, Andrei," said Bobrok. "Keep close to him, and if you see the slightest misgiving, weakness, or timidity on his part—cut it short, dispel it."

"That I'll do with all my might. It's precisely what we have united for—to support each other's strength."

"And I shall keep an eye on Vladimir Andreich. He's clever, but hot-headed," said Bobrok decisively. "And if you notice anything going wrong with me . . ."

"Never fear," answered Dmitri Olgerdovich. "We'll stand by you no less. And if aught were to happen to us . . ."

"Keep a stout heart!" Bobrok rose. "This is not our first battle nor our last. But it is a great one."

The Olgerdovich brothers fell silent, watching him and recalling his words. It had long been known in the family that Bobrok was endowed with some mysterious force—whether of clairvoyance, wisdom, or sorcery, none could tell. But he certainly foresaw the future, even penetrating its secrets far ahead.

The man himself, his dark beard touched with silver and his crescent-shaped brows shading his eyes, had already darted to the door. Somebody with clanking weapons was hurriedly mounting the steps.

Bobrok flung open the door. The night without was dark, and from the darkness warriors emerged and walked into the lobby. They were headed by Rodiyon Rzhovski. They brought news from the first scouting party, the one detailed to keep watch on Mamai's movements. The tidings conveyed to Moscow by Andrei Popovich were now confirmed, together with rumours about the numerical strength of the khan's host.

Mamai was already on the upper reaches of the Don and had encamped on the banks of the Krasivaya Masha.

"On the way hither we met with Mamai's envoys. They were going to Moscow to seek audience with the Grand Prince."

"Too late," said Bobrok.

"From rumours, we have gathered that Mamai has misgivings. He has learnt that Dmitri Ivanovich is not running away from him, but, on the contrary, assembling an army. So the khan is dispatching envoys to parley."

"We may as well hear what they have to say and then discuss the issue," remarked Bobrok thoughtfully. He went off to inform the Prince of this fresh news.

By dawn all the troops were astir throughout Kolomna—those billeted in the city and those camping outside its walls. They marched to the Oka, to the wide and wild Divichie Plain, where in ancient times Slav maidens were offered in sacrifice to pagan goddesses. Bobrok marshalled them and posted each to his appointed place.

The military formations soon occupied the entire field, crushing the tall grass seared by the summer heats and hitherto untrampled. Regiments stood shoulder to shoulder, elbow touching elbow, elbow-guards jingling against those of friends. The vast plain shook with the neighing of horses and thrilled with the acclamations which burst forth from warriors as they caught sight of Dmitri, who scanned them as he went. Bobrok galloped forward to meet him.

From the heights of the city Dmitri could see the army poised like an eagle with outspread pinions. Straining forward like an eagle's head stood the footguards' regiment, while the majority of the troops standing in the rear resembled the body of an eagle. The regiments to right and left constituted the outspread wings, while behind them, like a gorgeous tail, the reserves stood at ease.

A mighty blast came from numerous battle-horns, a wailing from the field organs, and the homespun linen banners rustled and whistled from their long shafts. Never in his whole life had Dmitri contemplated so many regiments welded into a single army, and he was seized with fear.

As he rode, he bit his lip and scrutinized the faces in the ranks, searched the eyes of the commanders stationed at the head of their regiments. He endeavoured to detect a sign of faint-heartedness, doubt, sorrow, some defect that he might remedy and thus dispel his own fear.

"There are too few foot soldiers," Dmitri complained to Bobrok.

Bobrok looked closely into Dmitri's face.

"Infantry is needed for the defence of towns, Dmitri Ivanovich, but we are marching forward."

"Will these be sufficient?" asked Dmitri, pointing to the countless host.

"Would you care to have a count made?"

"Yes, please do."

They rode on. Farther and farther stretched the plain, and still the contingents seemed as numberless as ever. Banners fluttered above the warriors and plumes waved from their helmets.

"Mamai, too, is assembling and counting his forces, I reckon," remarked Dmitri.

"His forces have already been counted. We can count ours over again if such be your pleasure."

"Please do so—just to be more certain."

"I shall set about it today."

"Tomorrow we start," said the Prince.

"I think so, too."

"I want the men to get a sound sleep. Give them a good meal."

"Do not worry your head about that. We have long since learned this lesson from the Tatars: eat first, then fight."

"You have learned it well, Prince, for you have a keen eye."

"Not keener than your own, my lord. Harbour no misgivings. We look far ahead—all of us. There is no room for doubt."

Dmitri listened attentively, for this was Bobrok the seer who was speaking. Moreover, he spoke loudly, like a prophet foretelling the future.

"There is no flaw to be found anywhere. The entire land is like a skilfully tempered sword. From the days of Batu-khan, Russia has lain prostrate on live embers, thus becoming in the process of time well tempered. She may bend, but she will not break. She is of the purest steel."

Dmitri felt reassured.

"And Oleg! By God, it was he, the damned, the new Sviatopolk, who started this."

"You speak well, my lord. We shall not forget."

"Indeed we shall not!"

Courage returned to Dmitri's heart. He looked more resolute as he rode with Bobrok at the head of a retinue of princes and commanders.

Here, in the open field, as before every battle, Dmitri split up his regiments among his commanders.

"Prince," said he to Bobrok, "your dispositions are as though we were already engaged."

"A rehearsal, my lord. It is for you to decide who is to be in command of each regiment."

So the Grand Prince appointed Gleb Drutski as commander of the advance troops and Vladimir with his brother Dmitri Vsevolozhki as his senior officers.

The right flank he reserved for himself, while placing the left under his brother Vladimir, who was on his way but had not yet joined them. The three Bielozerski princes he detailed to stand by the black standard of the Grand Princes of Moscow. These were the two brothers, Fedor and Ivan, with their nephew, who was also named Fedor. Dmitri was well aware from past campaigns that the Bielozerskis were resolute, brave, and gallant.

Mikula Veliaminov was placed in command of the Kolomna regiment; Timofei Valuiev of the Vladimirski; Rodion Kvashnia of the Kostroma troops; Andrei Sarkisov of the Pereslavl contingent. To Vladimir Andreich, Dimitri attached Danil Beleut and Konstantin Kononovich.

Once again he rode past the serried ranks—just to make sure they were truly to be depended upon. He consulted Bobrok to know whether any changes were indicated.

Mamai's envoys were approaching Kolomna. They looked about them in the dense woodland, noted the narrow tracks. Soon their armies would be advancing here in the wake of Mamai—not as bearers of gifts to the Grand Prince of Moscow but to seize upon everything the city still owed to the Horde, all the unpaid tribute, all the gold, all the power.

The khan had sent them to scrutinize Dmitri's countenance, to examine the walls of the Kremlin, to find out the number of troops in the city, to gauge the strength Dmitri was able to put up against the Horde.

Mamai knew his own strength, which surpassed that of Batu-khan. He believed that Dmitri would surrender, for the khan deemed him to be calculating, shrewd, and also timid. Surely Dmitri would come to realize that resistance was futile and be willing to yield?

Within one day's march of Kolomna, Mamai's envoys were overtaken by Russian troops.

Murza Tash-beg, who headed the mission, inquired :

"Is Dmitri, your prince, still in Moscow? Or has he already fled to the Dvina?"

Rodivon Rzhevski replied wearily :

"Our sovereign lord is not at Moscow."

"Where is he then?"

"At the speed you are going, he is about ten hours' march away in Kolomna."

"Is he on his way to the Horde, by any chance?"

"Maybe he is."

"But is he?"

"He is stationed at Kolomna with the army, there to meet your little Mamai."

"With an army?"

"Surely you would not expect him to receive your khan with his bare hands!"

The Russians thereupon rode off.

Tash-beg halted his men.

He looked at the fair beards and round blue eyes of some of his followers. Types were altering in the Horde. Born of captured Russian women, were not these men descendants of the ploughmen who had reclaimed this glade, planted the apple trees yonder which had now reverted to crabs, warmed themselves at these clay stoves of which nothing but rubble remained?

Hesitatingly, without any of the haughtiness proper to an ambassador, Tash-beg questioned the members of his mission :

"What shall we do now?"

"Push on and state our demands as the khan commanded," answered old Dzhumai-beg.

His advice was due rather to timidity than to resoluteness. He was afraid to return to Mamai and tell of his growing fear of Moscow.

Tash-beg took pity on him.

"You must return home, Dzhumai-beg. You will report all we have gleaned to the great khan while we go forward. We shall take the khan's gifts to Dmitri—the Yarkend scimitars and helmets, the Tauromenian horses with the Shemakha saddles, and we shall intimidate him with threats."

Dzhumai-beg hurried off home accompanied by a small escort, while Tash-beg with the gifts and the khan's severe claims pursued his way to Kolomna.

It was still broad daylight when Bobrok entered Dmitri's chamber.

"We've checked them up, my lord."

"How many are there?"

"In Kolomna alone there are one hundred and fifty thousand. Another four thousand have just arrived from Kozelsk—Tatar-haters of long standing. Also we have been told that men from Ryazan are coming, and some from many other towns. Those I did not count. Nor did we count the Moscow foot regiments who will join us with Timofei Vasilievich."

"Not so bad a showing, eh?" and Dmitri winked.

"You are right."

"All's well in that case."

The words were hardly out of his mouth when the Tatar mission was announced.

"Bring them here, but don't allow them to spy out the land too much. No honours or greetings are permitted. No hostility either," Bobrok ordered

severely. He then dispatched pages to summon those of the princes who were not present in the anteroom.

The Tatar envoys waited in the courtyard, which was surrounded by a high palisade. They listened to the conversations going on around them, hoping to ascertain the size of the force behind Dmitri. They could scarcely believe their own ears.

"The army seems to be big."

After a considerable time they were summoned.

No greeting was vouchsafed them as they mounted the staircase. Tash-beg frowned. In the anteroom the princes made way for them silently and indifferently. Tash-beg grew furious. Dmitri remained seated to receive them.

Tash-beg bowed gravely, expecting from Dmitri a cordial bow in response. But the Grand Prince said ungraciously :

"State your business."

"The great khan has commanded me to deliver to you his most high and royal greetings and instructions. Further, the great khan ordered us to tell you that if you desire to obtain his royal favour you will have to reckon the amount of the tribute which is his due on the basis of what the Russian princes paid in the past. Henceforth the tribute must be equal to that paid to Chani-khan—may Allah grant him rest—by your ancestors—may the memory of them be everlasting ! The khan remits the amounts due to him during the years you paid a small tribute. He forgoes arrears of payment. As a mark of his esteem the khan bestows on you these gifts—scimitars of Yarkend workmanship, a helmet chased in gold, Tauromenian thoroughbreds provided with Shemakha saddles. Order your servants to take reception of these gifts from us."

Dmitri said nothing and seemed to be waiting for him to add something further. Tash-beg thought : "He was expecting more gifts from us. We have brought too few."

He then disclosed the secret agreement which Mamai had communicated to him.

"Moreover, the great khan wishes to confer upon you a great and special favour. He has a daughter, so beautiful that when she but glances at the flowers of the steppes they begin to sing like birds. When she looks upon the sea, fish are seen to emerge from the roe, so bright are her eyes. And the great khan is willing to bestow her as wife upon your son."

"I thank you for the honour," said Dmitri severely. "Were my son to glance upon the steppe, my patrols would be able to count all our enemies as if it were the brightest sunshine. And if he looked the foe in the face, nothing would remain but a handful of ashes." Dmitri smiled and then continued : "I am afraid that were two such exquisite creatures united in Moscow, nothing worth while would be left over for the Horde. I do not intend to deprive the Horde lands of their portion. I am told that they are already somewhat impoverished. As for the other gifts : take them to where they came from. I have weapons and horses in plenty, and my arms are well whetted. I do not desire either to threaten you or to stand in awe of you. As for the claim of tribute, I struck a bargain with Mamai. We arrived at a decision, and I see no reason to alter it. I agree to continue paying the present tribute, provided he immediately withdraws his Horde from the Don. But I refuse any extra payment. It would never enter my head to bring ruin on my country merely to satisfy Mamai's greed. Tell him this. Go and tell him. And do not tarry here in Kolomna. By evening there must be no trace of you left within our city. Go."

Again Tash-beg was escorted to the gate in complete silence.

Chewing his beard, he mounted his horse in the courtyard and left Kolomna at the head of his retinue, trailing back the khan's gifts in his wake.

All those who had gathered in the anteroom watched with mute excitement the departure of the Tatar envoys. No sooner had the last man disappeared than a buzz of conversation broke out. Everyone seemed to wish to give vent to their feelings. Dmitri's firm stand met with general approval. War had been declared. When the excitement had quieted down Bobrok approached Dmitri.

"Following upon our decision I have dispatched a third patrol into the steppe. I have given them secret instructions to outstrip the khan's messengers and to make all speed."

"Whom did you send?"

"Sengru Melik, and with him Ignati Krenia, Foma Tinin, Petr Gorski, Karp Oleksin, and Petrusha Churikov."

"Fine lads every one of them!" said Dmitri with approval. It did not seem to matter how great was the assembled host, he knew many among them. He had not spent his whole life among warriors to no purpose. He inquired impatiently:

"Have they been well fed?"

"Who? The patrol?"

"No, the whole army. Tomorrow we start."

"Everything is in readiness. We've been here for five days and have shaken down."

In the cool of the morning of August 21 the army took to the dew-softened road up the Oka. This had been decided upon already in Moscow. The commander-in-chief, the courtier Timofei Vasilievich Viliaminov, with what remained of the Moscow garrison, was to join the bulk of the army, not at Kolomna, but where the river Lopasnia debouches into the Oka near the ford. This was a convenient rallying-point for Vladimir Serpuhovski with his regiments from Borovsk.

Moreover, this circuitous route, besides facilitating the juncture with Vladimir, was considered necessary because Oleg's secret parleys with Mamai were known early in Moscow. At that time, when none wished to credit them, it had been decided that as a precautionary measure the Muscovites should not trespass on Ryazan territory lest unnecessary bloodshed ensue. Thus their strength would be preserved for the main task.

From the Lopasnia to the Don the road was unfrequented. Oleg would be loth to venture on it. This was the age-old trade route from Moscow to the Don. Though longer, it was safer.

Three route marches sufficed for the troops to reach the Lopasnia. Serpuhovski was expecting them. Veliaminov was approaching. They waited awhile for the laggards. Then, on August 26, Dmitri ordered the crossing of the Oka. On the farther side were the shores of Ryazan's principality. Dmitri assembled his commanders and thus addressed them:

"Start crossing. God be with us! But remember my orders: during your march over Ryazan territory let no one touch so much as a hair."

This injunction was not because he went in fear of Oleg but because he wanted to husband his forces for the decisive battle. His commanders, realizing this, adhered strictly to his orders.

On August 27 Dmitri and all his court likewise crossed the Oka. Oleg was horrified when he got wind of this. Dmitri actually moving over his territory when he had persuaded all and sundry, himself more especially, that Moscow's prince was in hiding on the Dvina! Oleg's troops were already

advancing from Pronsk to Dubok. He issued orders for them to come to a halt. After due deliberation he sent them back to Pronsk.

But Klim pursued his way. With him came armourers, tanners, market gardeners, saddlers, blacksmiths, and monks who had discarded their habit. Their equipment was of the most motley kind. Some bore axes fastened to long poles, others had swords, many wore bast shoes, others had armed themselves with round stones and slings—the sort of weapons with which their forbears had gone to fight the Tatars in the days of Evpati Kolovrat. The way was long. Each carried, as part of his equipment dangling from his shoulders, a packet of food rations, a spare pair of bast shoes, and a change of underclothing—this last item in case he was slain, so that he could be buried in fresh linen.

They were surprised to encounter Dmitri's patrol on their own soil.

"He's no laggard!"

Fires were lit by the roadside and the men settled down so as not to squander their strength by walking. They were not kept waiting long, and were soon absorbed in the main army as a woodland stream is merged into a mighty river.

Chapter XLV

KYRILL JOINS THE TROOPS

ALARMING RUMOURS REACHED MIKEISHA'S HUT.

One morning Schap and his band emerged on to the Skopin road, where they expected to encounter some merchants with a view to committing highway robbery. Instead of this they fell in with a Tatar patrol. A skirmish ensued during which there were casualties on both sides.

Kyrill had now lived a whole year in the forest. Many thoughts had assailed him in that time. Since he had to live the life of a wild animal and a highwayman, he had become unkempt and brutish in appearance. No other means of gaining a livelihood were open to him. On the left bank of the Oka Dmitri's men were continuously on the lookout for him, while on the right bank he went in fear of Oleg's. Lithuania was far away, and there he would be in a strange land. When he happened to walk past villages he would glance surreptitiously and with envy at the windows, just as a beast of the wild would at a warm shed. Was he for ever to be deprived of the vision of a human countenance?

The Tatars were responsible for these conditions. Had it not been for them Dmitri would not have treated his masons so cruelly, Kyrill would not have murdered the messenger who bore news of the Tatars, nor would Aniuta have been snatched away from him. . . . Where was she now? Rumour had it that the Horde was again on the move. Was Aniuta also being dragged along with their lousy tents? Could it be that those very men who had captured her or killed her were coming here? All her misfortune had been caused by the Horde, as likewise that of Ovdotia the Ryazan woman, and countless others.

With glee he broke up Tatar caravans in winter and sank their barges in summer. To the men of his band he was known, not as Kyrill but as Kirsha, and Kirsha was dreaded and searched for far and wide. But it was no easy matter to lay hold of a man such as Kirsha. If he went to Dubok, folk shouted, "Stop thief!" while Kirsha was already on the Ryazan road throttling merchants. They would be hotfoot in chase of him to Pronsk, while

he would be getting into bed at Perevitsk. The stolen goods were stored in the forest in secret caches and ravines in Mikeisha's custody.

Now the forest, too, was menaced by the Tatar invader who brought calamity to the whole Russian land. Russian Aniutas would be carried off into captivity and all the inhabitants of the countryside would, like Aniuta, be haled away on a lasso to the Horde by some squinting murza.

Kyrill sat over the camp fire lost in meditation. His fellow gangsters were talking among themselves.

"I expect there are many down-and-outs among the Tatars as well."

"It isn't the Tatar people who are invading us, but their murzas. If it weren't for them I believe many of their people would come and sit round our camp fire."

"Idle talk," put in Kyrill. "We've got to beat them. We can settle later who is egging them on and who is innocent."

"You think they must be beaten?"

"Don't you think so, too?"

"I wouldn't mind."

—"Then come on."

"Will you lead us?"

"Why not?"

"Then I'll go."

Quite a number of the band gathered round them. Their numbers grew. They were expecting Schap. It was said that he was bringing his possessions from Ryazan for safety's sake. Someone asked:

"Whither are you going?"

"To fight the Tatars."

"And who'll stay behind once Kirsha becomes our leader?"

Thus Kyrill became their leader.

First they collected information about the Horde. They waited for Schap's return. The best weapons they had were dug out of their hiding-places. They consisted mainly of Tatar armour of the finest workmanship. There was much merriment just before they set out. Mikeisha alone was left to guard the skull and gather in the honey. When all was ready the men marched away and Timoshei's bear, which was on its chain, set up a mighty roar. Whereupon its master rushed back to console the animal, saying soothingly:

"There now, Toptyga old boy, I'll be home presently. Don't fret."

During his stay in the woods the bear had grown into a huge beast. But Toptyga was gentle as a rule. Only at this moment, seeing that he was to be left behind, he flew into a rage, roaring loudly, and, snapping his chain in spite of its strength, for it had been forged in the Horde, he raced to join the gang. As soon as he reached them he dropped on all fours and rubbed his snout affectionately against Timoshei's back. It was thereupon unanimously agreed to take Toptyga along.

Klim had sent a message from Ryazan through Schap to Kyrill, who led his troupe along the route indicated. A year had gone by since the two men had met.

They did not take the beaten tracks, but pushed their way along trails made by wild beasts. Their progress was fast and sure. When they were on a foraging expedition they were wont to carry inconspicuous weapons and to dress in humble guise. But now even a prince might envy them their accoutrements. Their coats of mail shimmered with silver and sparkled with gold. Outlandish arabesques and infidel inscriptions shone from some of their helmets like gilded worms crawling over steel. All of them wore elbow-guards and high boots—

not the bast shoes in common use among the rank and file of the militia. A few of the men were unaccountably bashful about all this finery, for they had never before realized the value of the booty which fell into their hands and was stored in their caches.

They marched forward without fear of arrest. In any case there were few men among the guards who would prove a match for these hardy highwaymen. Besides, who would venture to lay hands on them now that Kirsha was leading them forth to fight for Russia?

As they advanced they made a mental note of everything on the way—birds, the spoor of animals, squirrels in the pine tops, stags dodging in and out among the trees, the ruins of settlements overgrown with brushwood. They caught a group of men which was trying to escape their notice. But these captives turned out to be highwaymen like themselves.

"What are you running away from? Come along with us."

"Whither?"

"To save our Russian land."

"Who from?"

"Haven't you heard about the murzas?"

"Hold on a bit, there are some beekeepers near here. We'll call them."

"Fine!"

Thus, growing in numbers, they passed through Skopin and on to Cherni Kurgani, then by-passed Baskaki in order to avoid an encounter with Dmitri's or Oleg's guards, circumvented Dubok, and emerged one evening on Kulikovo Plain.

This was the fifth day of September, 1380.

An owl hooted in the distance. Its melancholy wail echoed over the silent land.

"Has the bird gone out of its wits? Spring's the time for such hooting, not now."

"Maybe it's on its way to warmer climes?"

"But do owls migrate?"

The Don marked the beginning of the uninhabited steppe from the inflow of the Smolka, and from the river Nepriadva to the junction with the Sitka. This was Tatar territory, but it lay so far away from its owners that it had remained an empty wilderness. The deer alone, in their frenzied gallop from one forest to another, trampled its virgin soil. Snipe nested in its thick grass. The beasts of the wild shunned it, preferring the dense woodlands which surrounded it as providing better cover. Only lapwings built their nests among the hillocks and hopped about on the little mounds cocking their crests, or they would fly off crying pitifully when they sighted a fox creeping towards them.

Immemorial peace and stillness enveloped that plain. Centuries rolled over it without disturbing it with the sound of human voices or the neighing of horses. After days in the murmuring forest, Kyrill found the quietude pleasant but disturbing. What did such a hush forebode? A beast lies low and silent, watching its prey. If it roars it will not attack. Thus is it with men. So, maybe, was it with this plain. . . .

To avoid attracting attention no fires were lit that night, and Kyrill lay wakeful and alert on the fringe of the forest, fearing to venture into the open. He was not the only one whose sleep was light, for many of his men would raise a drowsy head from time to time and listen.

An owl hooted. The sky was spangled with stars.

Early on the morrow they cut across the plain, putting up coveys of birds in

their progress. They crossed the Don and continued the march in search of the Russian army. At times they halted to hearken to the noises of the woodland; they climbed the tallest trees; but in whatsoever direction they looked there was nothing but forest to be seen—the forest which drowned all life in its ceaseless murmur. Not a sign of humanity anywhere. . . .

After wandering all day, and as dusk was falling, they caught sight of camp fires glowing over the Don in their rear.

“Are they ours?”

“We’d better find out.”

They retraced their steps among the darkling trees, guiding their course by the glow. They tripped over invisible boughs, butted into storm-felled timber which it took them a long time to get round. Withered branches scratched their faces and caught in the straps of their weapons. Here and there they had to hack a way for themselves with their swords. But they never lost the guiding lights of the camp-fires and pushed on straight ahead. By the time they came upon the first of the bivouacs darkness encompassed the land.

Dmitri had halted his forces on the banks of the Don late that afternoon, just when the evening mists were rising above the trampled grass. Cranes, southward bound to take shelter in sunnier climes from the autumn cold, were trumpeting loudly as they flew athwart the grey sky. Towards these lands of sunshine the Don quietly rippled on. Serene and tranquil flowed the Don, unwitting of what was to come.

The last of the regiments were converging on to the plain. The creaking of baggage waggons filled the silence. A steamy haze rose above the place where the cavalry were encamped. Horses snuffled and neighed lustily. Weapons clanked. A subdued rumble of men’s voices came from all around.

Eyes strained to see whether there were any Tatars on the opposite bank. Two hundred thousand warriors gazed at the Don and at the lands beyond the river. They had heard so much about this stream. There, on the farther shore of the waters, lay the fringe of the vast Polovtsian Plain, an alien land. They stared at this alien country while their feet were firmly planted on their native soil. Those feet had become stiff and swollen with so much riding, and they were sore from marching. The men were gossiping wearily.

“Prince Igor crossed this same Don to fight the Polovtsi and hoped to draw water from the Don in his helmet. There is a ballad about it.”

“Old men tell that birds follow this Don in their flight to warmer lands away from our snows.”

“And the river just flows on, unaware of its fame.”

“No sign of Tatars on the opposite side.”

There, on the Polovtsian Plain, quite close, the enemy was waiting. But the bank, shrouded in mist, was deserted. At the edge of the plain, dark masses of trees towered into the sky. In the distance were the jagged outlines of the quiet hills. It was gloomy and desolate over there. Was the enemy in ambush or had he retreated?

Kyrill selected a site for his men’s encampment. Soon fires were ablaze. Soldiers strolled up to satisfy their curiosity.

“Whom has God led hither?”

“Murderers,” answered Kyrill.

“Damn you, can’t you tell the truth?”

“I am telling you the truth. We are highwaymen, murderers, robbers, and I am their chief.”

"But how comes it that robbers wear such princely apparel?"

"Who among us is wearing the apparel you speak of?"

"Why, just look at yourself. You're all aglitter with gold."

An old man, thin, gaunt, whose face was overgrown with hair as if with moss, approached the company leaning heavily on a staff. His skin was like parchment, or like that of a Suzdal ikon, and seemed to be smeared with a greenish mould. But his eyes shone like stars, stern and steadfast. He said:

"There are neither robbers nor murderers here. All of us are warriors. But if you are a prince, you must prepare yourself with prayers, for you are leading your men into battle, not on a plundering raid. Remember your past sins and repent. All will be forgiven you. Blood shed in a righteous cause is like a fire, it cleanses away every impurity. Believe me, my son, I have shed blood many a time, and I am prepared to do so now if God deems me worthy."

The old man walked away. He went from company to company, from regiment to regiment, peering solemnly from beneath his shaggy eyebrows into the faces of the soldiers to see whether they were manly and staunch, whether they were capable of heroic deeds.

Kyrril, too, sauntered among the soldiers. Great hairy dogs slouched from beneath his feet. They had followed the militia perchance the whole way from the White Sea. From all sides came the smell of smoke mixed with cooking. Suddenly a broad-shouldered giant, his eyes popping out of his head in surprise, confronted Kyrril.

"Grisha!" exclaimed Kyrril.

"So you have come, too," answered Kapustin.

"Of course."

"That's all to the good."

They stood silently taking one another in, while Grisha scrutinized Kyrril and his armour. He stared and breathed stertorously as if he had caught Kyrril after an arduous pursuit.

"You have done well to come."

"And what if I had not?"

"We'd have caught you."

"Is the Prince here as well?"

"He accompanied us all the way. He is here. He's holding a council of war at Chernava."

Again they fell silent, gazing at one another.

"You're smart, slipping through our fingers as you did at Ryazan."

"Well, you're nothing but a goose to think that you could snare an eagle in full daylight."

"Yes, you are certainly an eagle. I see it now."

"With whom are you drafted?"

"Andrei Olgerdovich. In the reserve."

"I'm going to find out where I'm to join up."

"Ask to be drafted along with us. If all your men are like you, we'll make a mighty strong force."

"The reserve is too far away from the active front. That's where I'd like to be."

"When one's dealing with Tatars one never knows which will be the front line or which the rear. Ask to join us, then we'll be together."

"All right. I'll go straightway and find out."

They parted and Kyrril went in search of Klim.

The faint splash of water against horses' flanks sounded from the river. Scouts were being sent across to capture a prisoner and to call on the infidel.

Many eyes followed these brave lads. What would befall them? Every span of the unknown plain held the threat of an arrow or an ambush.

Reaching the opposite bank, the Russian warriors, who were known to everyone, shook themselves free of water, tightened their saddle-girths, held their spears in rest, and moved off into the distance. Many eyes followed them.

"They'll sample some of Mamai's honey."

"And they themselves will give the khan a taste of our fare."

Sentries were starting to take up their posts beyond the camp. Patrols were setting forth. Tents for princes and boyars were being put up. Commanders rejoined their regiments to make ready for the night. But many, mastering their fatigue, were waiting. At some distance away from the Don, at Chernava, the princes and senior officers sat in council.

The troops were awaiting the news from over there.

Chapter XLVI

DMITRI'S HOST CROSSES THE DON

THE LOW, SQUAT HUTS OF CHERNAVA, SUBMERGED IN THE GRASS, WERE STREWN over the ground and looked rather like worm-eaten mushrooms.

The princes had to bend their heads to scramble through the low doorway of one of them, and, still stooping, they seated themselves on the benches.

The army had marched from the Lopasnia to the river Osetr, thence through the town of Bereza and along the Dankov highway to Dorozhen and the river Tabola. Finally they passed through Chernava and came to a halt on the Don.

Dmitri stayed behind at Chernava.

The inside walls of the hut were white. It was evident that the women had set about cleansing them by first applying steam and then scouring with besoms, rush-brooms, and sand, removing the smoke and grime from the logs. The rafters alone remained blackened with a sheen on them which resembled that of Chinese lacquer. The smoke-hole in the wall behind the stove admitted a glimmer of light and revealed vistas of the autumn sky, patches of blue intervening between the ragged drifts of grey clouds.

While the princes settled themselves in their seats, and others drew up ladles full of Don water from the housewife's tub, the servants were busy laying home-spun cloths on the table, and lit the candles in their silver candlesticks. A rosy flickering glow filled the dwelling, and human shadows moved across the walls, obstructing the light.

The princes gathered round the board while the boyars stood in the background. Prince Holm turned to Bobrok and whispered:

"Is it not a bad omen? The candles have been lit while there is still daylight?"

"Do not let that trouble you, Prince. Candles burn all day long in churches and no harm comes of it."

"Ah, but there they are lit to the greater honour of God."

"Whereas here they have been lighted in honour of the Russian people!"

"You must always have the last word!"

Dmitri bided his time. He had coaxed his massive back into an angle of the wall and from that vantage point towered over the rest. His raven hair veiled the ikon of Our Saviour in its niche. He raised his eyes to look at his council, and then lowered them again. The members of the council filled the entire hut.

Dmitri's princes were attired in a variety of costumes. Holm wore a Persian coat of bright colouring trimmed with sable. Solemn though he was, he produced a festive air as though he were going to a wedding instead of into battle. He chose to ignore the fact that the enemy was encamped close by. The Olgerdovich brothers sat side by side in full panoply of war, ready to spring to arms at the signal. Bobrok was similarly attired, the only difference being that he had thrown over his coat-of-mail a plain, short coat, embroidered in green and red. One of the Tarusa princes was clad as if he intended to go to church on his own estate. Both the princes of Bielozersk were cased from head to foot in armour and sat rigid and stern. Dmitri Rostovski shaded his eyes from the glare of the candle with fingers as delicate as twigs. Dmitri Bobrok, on the other hand, stared without so much as a blink at the candle and the flame, which, as if discountenanced by his gaze, flickered and wavered from side to side. The brothers Olgerdovich, in their beautifully-wrought steel-blue armour, seemed to Dmitri to be a trifle too heavily harnessed. Prince Andrei was dark and had an aquiline nose, taking after his grandmother in this respect. Dmitri thought to himself that he must make inquiries from Vladimir as to whether Olgerd's mother had been brought from Hungary. Family trees were not Dmitri's forte. He relied on Vladimir, his brother, for such information. There was not a royal or a princely house in the west which was not related to him by blood in some way or the other. Vladimir Bielozerski, who sat next to Dmitri, turned sideways so as to face his lord, and looked straight into his eyes. Vladimir appeared more erect and broad of build in his armour. His white beard flowed down over his coat-of-mail. His son, Ivan, was tall, sturdy, with a black beard, and when plunged in thought he shut his eyes, thus taking on a resemblance to Dmitri. Two Tarusa princes were present. Both were dark-complexioned, narrow-faced, and lean. They had fought well in former battles. The one thing Dmitri did not like about them was that even when on the march they conversed in Greek, as if they were monks from Constantinople. Another sore point was that they had had their mansion decorated by Greek artists in a style resembling the House of God. The Grand Prince would have no Greek artists to serve his needs. Russian beauty sufficed him, and this had to be preserved at a time when it was being attacked from all sides. Not being glib of tongue, Dmitri thought the more. When forced to speak, he felt shy.

He scrutinized them all from his corner. None spoke, for all were awaiting his words. True, Bobrok had been whispering something into Olgerdovich's ear, but he, too, fell silent.

Twenty princes had gathered round Dmitri. They were all in his service. At this poor and crowded table no ordinary meeting was being held to discuss such topics as an inheritance, or the partitioning of a vacant possession, or a memorial or wedding feast. Here twenty princes were gathered together for a single purpose—to wage war against the common foe, ready to die one for the other. Such a thing had not happened since the days of Batu-khan. But then, each had fended for himself and had ignored the motherland as a whole.

And Dmitri reflected :

"I shall have to ask Bobrok whether this has ever happened in our earlier history. He is a well-read man and will be able to tell me. But no, it cannot ever have happened before."

He had bided his time. His keen eyes noted that Andrei Olgerdovich was itching to speak, but was waiting for the Prince of Moscow to have the first say.

The army was encamped on the Don. Should they cross the river? Dmitri was undecided. The march had been a long one, taking the troops across the

Moskva, the Oka, and the Osetr. Now the Don barred the way. Should they wait here or advance? He had planned to occupy Rias Plain, but it was dangerous to leave Ryazan in the rear. Oleg might attack them. For this reason the course had been altered. What was the next move to be? Farther afield lay the alien land of the Polovtsi. Igor had crossed the Don and had suffered defeat. His own mother used to say that in one's own home the walls are a help. And what would his father have said? He recalled his father's proverb: "The waters of life flow over those who take what comes to them lying down."

Still absorbed in thought, Dmitri rose to his feet. But the ceiling proved too low for his uncommon stature, so he leaned forward with both palms pressed on the table. Then he spoke:

"Brothers! What is to be our next move? The Don lies in front of us. Beyond the river is alien land. Shall we march forward or shall we wait where we are? Give your minds to these alternatives, brothers."

He stared down at the pattern of the tablecloth. Then he lifted his head and met their eyes squarely. In the faces of Vladimir and Bobrok he noted decision, and the pride which filled his heart was akin to happiness. Again he lowered his head and his cheeks were flushed with satisfaction. It seemed as if the Byzantine pattern on the cloth held a forecast of the day to come.

"Are we to remain here, or shall we measure our strength against that of the Horde on the other side of the Don? The Don lies in front of us," he said, as he resumed his seat without removing his hands from the table. He looked up at Bobrok, who was speaking.

"Tatar victories have long since become a commonplace. Do the Tatars ever await the advent of their foe? No, they are always the first to strike. They sweep down like a flood in the spring spate, wave upon wave, until the towns and the people opposing them are overwhelmed. They neither stand still nor do they wait. That is why they have invariably been victorious. They invade territories and ford rivers that have been ours since time immemorial. They start a war when it is convenient for them, and never await the convenience of the enemy. If we live with wolves, we must howl like wolves. We must cross the Don. That is my opinion."

After Bobrok, Fedor Bielozerski spoke:

"We all know that the great Yaroslav crossed a river and defeated Sviatopolk, and Alexander Yaroslavich crossed the Neva and defeated the Swedes. Men will put up a sturdier fight when they know that there is no means of retreat. Many such crossings and victories are recorded in our annals from times of old. Very often we have been the victors on alien lands, while defending our own on the Polovtsian Plain and in distant Byzantium. My advice is: Let us cross the Don."

Holm rose to oppose the motion:

"Prince! What have we risen for? To defend Russia. Why, then, should we spill our blood on foreign soil? Let us await them here. Here we shall be defending Russia, and it will be Russian soil which will lap up the blood of the infidel. Moreover, it is preferable that a man should shed his blood on his native earth."

But Andrei Polotski likewise urged that the Don be crossed:

"While our strength is still untouched, let us go forward. Assail them before they can assail us. Never before has Russia mustered so vast a host."

"He's right," mused Dmitri; "never before . . ."

Polotski continued:

"If you want a stiff fight, order that the crossing be started at once. Thus we shall kill any idea of retreat. Let each and every man of us make a straight fight of it. There must be no thought of personal safety, but only of victory."

Holmski turned to Polotski, saying:

"You seem to have forgotten that Mamai has assembled a great host. In addition to his own troops, he has got the support of the Kossogs. Then there are Franks from Kaffa and a contingent of Tauromenians. The question is, can we cope with such a swarm? And if not, who of us can expect to escape in a strange land? Shall we, like horses, stumble straight into the lasso? In front and on our right flank there will be the Nepriadva, and the Don will bolster our rear. Our left is flanked by a wild forest which forms an impassable jungle. Besides, for all we know, Jagiello may already have joined them. He is your brother. Are you, perchance, enticing us into a trap?"

"Pray do not reproach me with my kinsfolk's activities. This is no time to delve into family chronicles. If you look up your own records you will find that Holm princes have taken Tatar women to wife."

"Heavens, fancy your raking up so ancient a story! That great-grand-mother of mine has been dead these hundred years. Your Jagiello is up against us here and now. As to your father, Olgerd Hediminovich . . ."

"With whom you sought shelter from Moscow . . ."

Dmitri banged the table with such force that the ikon in the corner shook and one of the candles toppled over and fell to the floor.

"Holmski, this is not the season for such talk. Besides, a lasso ten miles wide is too loose for the throat."

In his impetuosity Dmitri had revealed his secret intention to march into the territory on the other side of the Don.

The boyars stood behind the seated princes, taking note of their deliberations and biding their own time. Now it was Timofei Veliaminov who was speaking. He was Moscow's great commander-in-chief, whose wisdom had been gained in the course of many campaigns, who was famous for his victories. He supported the motion to go ahead.

At this moment Brenko announced Tiuchev's return from Mamai's camp. All faces turned to the door.

Tiuchev entered, calm and neat, his head held a trifle higher from the happiness he felt at having carried out Dmitri's mission successfully.

Everybody listened attentively to his report. He told of his conversation with Mamai, repeated the text of the letter he had destroyed, did not divulge his own reply to the murza, but advocated an immediate attack against the Tatars.

"Oleg has withdrawn. Jagiello will start from Odoiev tomorrow morning. That is about thirty miles from here. We should have time to finish the job before his arrival."

"Wolves are easily tackled if they are dealt with one by one," said Fedor Bielozerski.

"Agreed," answered Vladimir.

"So that's the lie of the land," said Polotski, nodding towards Holmski. But the latter answered in surprise:

"Well, it seems there is nothing for us but to advance. Do you think we of Tver are more faint-hearted than the men of Moscow?"

Vladimir laughed. Dmitri, again supporting himself on his hands, rose.

"Brothers!" he cried.

All sprang to their feet as he had done, and thus standing they listened to what he had to say.

"God has forbidden us to violate foreign territories by crossing their borders. This I say to Our Lord and Saviour: I take upon myself whatever sin there may be. Were I not to trespass on alien soil, our enemies would creep like snakes into our nest. Therefore I assume full responsibility. Metropolitan Alexei taught us this lesson. Each of us knows the law of the forest: one wolf at a time is easier to strangle. But it is easier for three wolves to throttle us. If we stay here we shall be giving them time to form into a pack. By crossing the river we shall forestall them, deal with Mamai first and then singly with the other two. We have not gathered here to see our cursed countryman Oleg supporting Mamai. We have come to annihilate them. It is not the Don we are defending, but our motherland, and we shall either save her from ruin and slavery or lay down our lives in her behalf. Better an honourable death than a life spent in shame. May the blessing of Our Lord be upon us for our salvation. Forward, march, beyond the Don!"

All crossed themselves, but remained standing as though loth to disperse. A page informed Dmitri that messengers from Father Sergei of Troitsa were awaiting his pleasure.

Dmitri was on the alert in an instant. What would be Sergei's message on the eve of battle?

"Admit them."

The boyars made way for two men who had taken the severest monastic vows. They stepped into the circle of light cast by the candles. One was gaunt and broad-shouldered; but neither mortification of the flesh nor prayer and vigils had succeeded in reducing the robust rotundities of the other. Their black habits, embroidered with white crosses symbolizing complete renunciation of the world's temptations, were covered with dust. Dmitri recognized one of them. He had always acted as a sort of bodyguard to Sergei, accompanying his frail father superior on numerous journeys. He was a native of Briansk, of noble birth, by name Alexander, though before his monastic baptism he had been known as Peresviet. The other, his brother, known as Oслиabia, had also been a warrior before taking the monastic vows. While at Troitsa, Dmitri had heard tell of Oслиabia's great strength and meekness.

Sergei's note was handed to Dmitri by this same Oслиabia. The Grand Prince unrolled it quickly, and before he had had time to read the opening lines he saw the concluding ones:

Therefore go forward, my lord, and wage war on the infidels.

Peresviet presented Dmitri with some of the consecrated bread from Troitsa. The Prince kissed the small dried loaf and laid it on the table beside the candles.

"Father Sergei sends us his blessing and tells us to advance," said Dmitri. But he thought to himself:

"Now in every church throughout Russia our priests will in all probability be preaching that it behoves us not to stand still but to march forward into battle. They are also enjoining upon our women to pray for us."

Dmitri knew the weight of Sergei's words, how terrible a thing it was to oppose him, how good it was that his own personal decision coincided with Sergei's will.

The boyars were talking among themselves, men whose grey locks or bushy beards concealed honourable scars. The monks were diffidently edging towards the doorway. Suddenly Brenko noticed a newcomer, a foot soldier, who announced in a loud voice:

"Prince! A prisoner has been brought along."

"Good," replied Dmitri.

Everybody followed him as he went outside. The candles alone remained on the table, softly spluttering as they gutted out, and the small loaf sent by Sergi was lying between them. Outside the door, where the troops had assembled, all was noise: men's voices, weapons clanking, horses neighing and pawing the ground. In the night-encompassed distance soldiers crowded round a blazing fire. They fell apart as Dmitri approached and thus disclosed the prisoner.

He lay supine, a crumpled saddle-cloth thrust beneath his head and shoulders. His mail had been wrenched off. The armour had probably been pulled away roughly, for his skin was grazed. His dusky skin was dirty and was smeared with russet stains of undried blood. He was so slender and supple at the waist that he appeared to be round-shouldered. He lay coiled up like a snake. His trousers were caked with mud and dung, but Dmitri also noted they were of a bright and costly Persian cloth.

"This is no common soldier, it seems."

Then only did he scan the captive's face. Silently staring up at the Grand Prince with overweening pride in his eyes, the Prince saw before him a smooth-cheeked stripling whose slits of eyes were set wide apart above the high cheekbones.

Tiuchev recognized him with surprise. It was the fifth murza, the one whom he had whipped and sent back to Mamai.

"How came you to be caught?" asked Tiuchev in Tatar.

"I was pursuing you," said the prisoner arrogantly.

"And you were laid low all over again," retorted Tiuchev sharply.

One of the troopers grinned.

"He was still warm from his own fire and is already basking in the glow of ours."

"Ours will soon prove a trifle too hot for him."

The murza had been captured by two of Dmitri's advance guard, Petr Gorski and Karp, when, at the head of a small detachment, the Tatar prince was galloping in the direction of the Russian encampment. Gorski had knocked the murza off his horse.

"He was going at a fine pace in front of his men. Before they could catch up I dragged him away and went off. The others had started to follow, when they were intercepted by one of our patrols. So they rallied and some of them were slain."

The first encounter was over. The fringes of the armies had contacted one another.

Dmitri asked an old interpreter who had spent many years as captive in the Horde and had partially forgotten his native speech:

"What information have you been able to extort from him?"

"He said that the khan is on the Kuzmin road. That Mamai is not hastening, for he awaits the arrival of Oleg and Jagiello. In three days' time he expects to reach the Don. We questioned him, saying: 'How great is Mamai's force?' And he said it was a vast host."

"You speak like a book," remarked Dmitri.

The interpreter answered nothing, ashamed that his turn of phrase had for many years been based on the Russian books procured during his sojourn in the Horde.

Bobrok asked Tiuchev:

"From what he tells us I gather that Mamai is on the River Mecha. He must have followed the Drychenski road, and before that the Muravski highway. But the Drychenski road lies between two highways—the Muravski and the Nogai. Are we to deduce from this that Mamai himself is between these two highways because the Horde is moving along both?"

"Prince, is it your intention to attack each of these highways separately?"

"That would be an excellent move, but risky, for while we were engaged with one of the highways we might be outflanked from the other. We shall have to take up a position where we cannot be outflanked. Then we should be outgeneralling one of Ghenghis's most cherished principles of warfare."

"But how are we to safeguard our rear? In any event, they'll surround us."

"It's a clear night. I shall ride to the Don and reconnoitre. An encounter on this plain is unavoidable."

"In what sort of shape is Mamai's army?" Dmitri asked the interpreter.

"The prisoner said it was a composite lot. How Mamai's allies fight, he knows not."

"They fight well," said Bobrok.

"But how many are there of them?" inquired Dmitri.

"He says three hundred thousand and another fifty thousand. Add that up."

"He tried falsehood at first, but we soon put a stop to that," said Tiuchev.

"Give the man some food," ordered Dmitri, and thereupon he walked away without looking back. He did not see the eyes of the prisoner grow round as an owl's, nor that he never took his eyes off the Grand Prince until Dmitri disappeared behind the soldiers.

It was quite dark when Dmitri's horse was brought to him. He groped for the pommel, and in spite of his bulk sprang lightly into the saddle. Without waiting for the rest to make ready, he headed his charger towards the Don, where, unseen in the gloom, stood the troops. In his wake came the princes, boyars, bodyguard, and court. The thud of hoofs was muffled by the moist, yielding September soil.

The sentries' fires glowed above the Don. From across the river wolves set up a howl. The dogs belonging to the troops broke out into an answering wail. Men had tried to outstare the flashing eyes of the beasts. All down the ages countless wolf packs had trailed after the Tatars—to devour remnants, burrow in the burnt rubble, gnaw corpses to pieces, and often to eat the wounded women and children. Since the wolves were howling, it meant that Mamai could not be far distant. After the lapse of many years, once again army faced army with only the night between them filled with darkness and the howling of wolves.

Dmitri issued instructions that a search be made to find suitable fords, while he himself rode through the entire camp and met Bobrok. They had secretly agreed to cross the Don by themselves and reconnoitre the unknown plain at dawn.

Vladimir Serpuhovski and both his brothers-in-law, Andrei Polotski and Dmitri Brianski, stood apart, waiting for Dmitri of Moscow and Dmitri Bobrok.

"In my opinion he is staunch," said Vladimir. "But even with me he is secretive."

Bobrok wanted to increase his sovereign's courage by practising divination in the open field, listening to the sounds of the earth.

"Ay, he is steadfast," answered Andrei. "And it is our duty to foster that steadfastness, for it is the foundation of our unity. By looking up to him, even a faintheart will feel ashamed of his own timidity."

Dmitri rode forward towards them ahead of Bobrok.

"Come," said he.

Bobrok galloped up, accompanied by Semion Melikov and a handful of troopers.

"Prince, more news. Mamai has got wind of the place where we are encamped and is hastening hither along the Ptania river so as to intercept our crossing the Don."

"Can he reach it in time?"

"No fear! We shall start crossing tomorrow at the peep of day. He is two full days' march away."

"Shall we go?" asked Vladimir.

Melikov pointed to the fords, which he had already crossed twice.

With muzzles thrust forward and tails floating on the water the horses at first waded gingerly into the stream. Then they began to swim. The retinue of princes, their knees pressed tightly against the horses' flanks, skimmed the dark waters of the Don with their hands. Shimmering stars were reflected in the stream. The river, flowing so silently through the night, seemed deep, menacing, and dumb. A thin crescent of moon was dipping behind the line of forest.

The horses' feet touched bottom, and the beasts clambered up the bank snorting their relief and shaking off the water. Stirrups and chains clanked. The shore rose steeply towards the plain, and the five princes rode up the slope.

Dawn was on the point of breaking. Behind a distant wood the sky took on a greenish hue. A solitary cloud flushed rosy in the early light.

Spurring on their steeds, they rode over the plain. The thick grass crouched under its mantle of dew, which was already being gathered upward in a vapour of mist.

"Dmitri," said the Grand Prince, addressing Bobrok, "listen-in to the earth; find out what this plain holds in store for us."

Bobrok came to a halt, gazing into the sky, which was painted with the glow of dawn. His keen eyes noted in the east a star red as a drop of blood. He walked away from his companions and lay down on the grass, pressing his ear to the ground. Thus he remained for a long time. Then he returned silent, refusing to divulge anything. But Dmitri insisted.

A huge flight of crows rose from the distant tree-tops and, cawing loudly, made off towards the west, which was still dark. Bobrok watched their flight gloomily.

"I heard to the eastward the cawing of crows and what seemed to be Tatar women wailing. And in the west, also, widows and sweethearts are weeping to the winding of horns."

He ceased, gazing towards the west where the tops of the woods were catching the first rosy mists.

"And the meaning of this is that there will be wailing on the Tatar side for the multitude of the slain. But there will be weeping in Russia's land, too, but accompanied by the knowledge of victory. That is what the horns proclaim. We must fight without sparing our blood, or yielding, and then our horns will sound for victory. That is what I heard, Prince, and thus I tell it you."

All dismounted and stood dumbly watching the slowly spreading mists and listening to the awakening birds.

From the camp came the sound of axes.

"What's that?" asked Dmitri.

"Acting on your orders, they have started building bridges for the infantry. As soon as it is light enough they will begin crossing to this side," answered Bobrok.

They made a circuit of the plain, and frequently Bobrok took a by-path, examining ravines, dismounting, walking down to reconnoitre. Occasionally wolves slunk away snarling.

"We shall post the regiments between the ravines so as to prevent Mamai from encircling us," Bobrok suggested.

"Our foe has yet another secret—always to keep some of their forces fresh for battle. We Russians invariably fight in a bunch, whereas the Tatars do so in relays. Thus, though we may have thousands of men, they are worn out, while the Tatars may have only hundreds, but these are fresh. That is why they win. We must divide our forces so as to wear down the foe and then bring in our fresh troops to defeat him," said Dmitri.

"Just my own idea," rejoined Bobrok. "And we shall carry it out. You, brothers Olgerdovich, will take up your positions in the rear and maintain the reserve at full strength. We shall ambush them with Vladimir and strike in our own good time."

Thus, for the first time in centuries, was the grass of Kulikovo Plain laid low beneath the chargers' hoofs.

With greater frequency did Russian patrols clash with Tatar scouts. The two vast armies were inexorably drawing together.

Chapter XLVII

THE BATTLE

AT DAWN ON SEPTEMBER 7 THE INFANTRY CROSSED THE DON BY A BRIDGE OF resinous pine logs, and entered the Don steppes.

The cavalry took the three Tatin fords just below the place where the Nepriadva flows into the main stream.

Before nightfall the whole of Dmitri's army had left the Russian motherland behind.

The commanders led their contingents to the positions which Bobrok had ordered them to occupy. Each camped on the very spot whence they were to deploy for the coming battle.

Dmitri issued orders that, once settled down, the troops were to relax and rest for what was left of the day.

The transport trains remained on the opposite bank of the Don, but everything which might be of use had been brought over. There were cauldrons and groats, cooking-oil and weapons. The one thing he forbade was the setting up of tents. It was as though he secretly planned to push forward. Being the eve of the Nativity of Our Lady, the autumn fast, no meat was cooked for the men. Nevertheless, ladles were kept busy. The commanders sauntered between the camp fires and encouraged the men by saying persuasively:

"Eat and rest. You've had a long march and need to relax. If called upon, we may have to go farther."

"That we will," answered the men cheerfully, as they continued to eat the porridge served to them.

The long march together had given them time to make friends. That is one of the best things about journeys. They all felt it would be a pity to part company; it was jollier to go on together. The road was new to them, the weather fine, and the soldiers were in a talkative mood. With the rank and file there were dancers and story-tellers, singers and jesters, while at the head of each regiment walked priests carrying ikons. Thus everyone's taste was catered for: pipes and music and amusing tales for those who wanted some fun; prayers and incense for the devout and the pious.

Kyrill had been on the lookout for Klim, but so far had not clapped eyes on him. Indeed, it was practically impossible to find anyone in the army of two hundred thousand men which had rallied to Dmitri's standard. More and more men were falling in, hundreds and thousands of them, some clad in armour, others without weapons, young and old, coming to join the Grand Prince's battalions from north and east.

Kyrill had been drafted into a contingent commanded by the Olgerdovich brothers. They were in charge of the reserve. These troops were posted near the Don with their left flank abutting on the river. In their rear the Nepriadva flowed into the Don. To the left, and in yet closer proximity to the Don, Vladimir Serpuhovski and his men were ambushed in a thick wood.

Kyrill looked with disapproval in that direction. In case of need they would be the first to cross the river, for the Tatin fords were within a stone's-throw of their position. For about three miles ahead of him were the serried ranks of front-line troops with the foot-guard regiment under the command of the Princes Drutski, Tarusa, and Obolenski. They formed the advance section. Its junior commanders were Mihail Cheliadin and a young tsarevich, Andrei Serkiz.

In the guards regiment Kyrill spied out the presence of the two monks of high standing he had seen before. One of them he recognized as Alexander, the tall man who had long ago at Troitsa given him a hand in unbuckling the stolen charger's saddle. Without knowing precisely why, Kyrill disliked the recollection of that meeting. It was as though it held some burden too heavy for him to shoulder. Alexander fixed an astonished eye upon Kyrill. It was a sombre look, impervious, so it seemed, to human sorrow and to whatever had happened in the past and to all that the future might hold. Kyrill lowered his lids and made haste to mingle with his comrades.

Immediately behind the guards the Grand Prince's own Grand Regiment was drawn up. It was commanded by Ivan Smolenski. Attached to him were the officers Timofei Veliaminov, Ivan Kvashnia, Mihail Andreich Brenko, and the famous men-at-arms, Dmitri Minin and Akin Shuba.

Skirting the ravines of the River Dubiak stood the regiment forming the right flank, commanded by the Princes Andrei Rostovsky and Andrei Starodubski, with their chief officer, Grunok.

The regiment guarding the left flank was under the command of the Princes Fedor and Ivan Bielozerski, Fedor Yaroslavski, and Fedor Molozhki, assisted by boyar Lev Morosov, nicknamed Mozir.

In Kyrill's regiment of reserves the Lithuanian princes, Andrei, Dmitri, and Roman Brianski, were making everything ready for battle. Their chief officer was Mikula Veliaminov, the Grand Prince's brother-in-law.

Grisha Kapustin had been drafted with Mikula's men, and it was among these that Kyrill and his band of outlaws were posted.

As they ate round the camp-fire the soldiers vied with one another in petting Toptyga and pressing tit-bits on the bear. Bruin danced about between

the camp-fires to the sound of Timoshei's piping. A sword had been girded round Toptyga's middle for a lark. Unfortunately, it proved too short. A helmet was placed on the beast's head, but it refused to stay put. Mikula Vasilievich happened to be making a round of inspection to see if the food was as it should be. Catching sight of the armed animal, he called out sharply :

"What's this ?"

The men were nonplussed for an explanation. The pipe squealed and its music died away. Timoshei felt sick with fear.

"What is this, I ask you ?" Mikula bawled again. "Is that a suitable outfit for a champion such as we have here ? Where is his leader ? Let him go at once to the armourer and have him rigged out to size. I'll drop along when I return."

He flicked his stallion with his whip and galloped off to find Dmitri.

Many a volunteer offered to escort Toptyga to the armourer's, but Timoshei refused to cede this honour to anyone. He led the bear away himself. He said sternly :

"My lord Mikula Vasilievich ordered me to have the beast equipped as a valiant warrior without delay. Bestir yourself and find something suitable to his size."

The armourer, glancing askance at the beast of the woods, rummaged beneath a pile of chain mail until he drew forth a monster set of armour, and from among the helmets a monster headpiece.

"Our Dmitri has a great choice of armament to fit any size or age. We're not paupers, are we ? I've been told that the Ryazan prince has led his men to war wearing bast shoes, regular tatterdemalions. He does not dare join Mamai because he fears to be put to shame."

"Who told you ?"

"Our scouts."

Meanwhile, Toptyga had been rigged out in chain mail, and an enormous helmet with red plumes nodding had been strapped to his head.

"That's securely fastened, anyway."

"He cuts a splendid figure as a warrior."

Mikula, who was on his way back from his rounds, said to Timoshei :

"Take the beast to the Grand Prince. After I'd told him about the bear, he was curious to see the animal for himself when equipped."

"Ay, ay, I'll carry out your orders, sir," Timoshei answered.

No sooner was Veliaminov's back turned than Timoshei ran off to find Kyrril.

"Father and leader," he cried, "what do you advise me to do ? I'm already, as it were, under arrest, and he's ordered my prosecution."

"Who is likely to arrest a fighting man ? You're crazed."

"So you think it's all right ?"

"Of course, get along with you. Have no fear !"

Kyrril watched his friend and the bear leaving the ranks, and the soldiers guffawed at the sight of the giant warrior ambling along with the crest of its helmet tilted slightly askew.

Bobrok, who was galloping for all he was worth from regiment to regiment to assign them their various positions, drew rein suddenly to stare at the mail-clad beast. With a hearty laugh he tossed Toptyga a morsel of gingerbread which he happened to have in his pocket. Then, wheeling, he recovered his grim cast of countenance and lashed his thoroughbred Asiatic steed into a gallop. His officers were hard put to it to keep pace with him. In deploying the troops

Bobrok endeavoured to dispose them in such a way that they took the formation of an eagle with outstretched pinions which had to be firmly supported by the impassable ravines whence the Kulikovo rivers spring.

Dmitri was sitting on the ground between Vladimir and Brenko when he first caught sight of the bear.

"Hello, Timoshei, so you've decked out your Toptyga," he exclaimed.

"What a memory!" thought Timoshei, his knees quaking. "As I was on my way hither, I prayed: 'Lord God Almighty, I implore thee not to let him recognize me.' But he's remembered even the bear's name."

"Toptyga," said Dmitri, "why have you ceased visiting my court?"

Brenko looked with disfavour at Timoshei and then explained to Dmitri:

"It's all my fault. Toptyga's leader is apt to lose his voice when I am about."

"Is he guilty of something?"

"He's a murderer."

"Well, we shall have to forget that here."

Timoshei flung himself at Dmitri's feet, but the Grand Prince put an end to the man's abasement by saying impatiently:

"First dance and play your pipe. This is a memorable day . . ." Then, suddenly recollecting himself, he added: "On second thoughts, you'd better not."

Timoshei still held his reed pipe to his lips, but his music was cut short as Dmitri waved him aside, saying:

"Go and play to the troops. Amuse them. I've got to observe the fast, for tomorrow is the Feast of Our Lady's Nativity."

Vladimir guessed that Dmitri's sudden melancholy was not due to religious observance, but to the realization that the warriors who would make merry to the sound of Timoshei's pipe this night would probably be doing so for the last time, then to fall asleep and never smile again. Dmitri hid his sadness so that the men might not be prematurely depressed. His main wish was to keep them calm and well fed.

Brenko drew nearer to Dmitri.

"Prince, I would like to ask you a question."

"What about?"

"Is it right to allow Prince Bobrok to place the militia in front of our personal troops? They are merely ploughmen, only villeins, and unskilled in the art of war. They will fall like sheaths of corn."

"Do you pity them?"

"What advantage is it to us that they be slaughtered?"

Dmitri frowned.

"And what shall we gain by having our trained troops slain while the yokels remain unscathed? Our main objective is that the troops shall hold out. Ploughmen we shall always be able to find."

"All the same, they are human beings."

"Your job is to track down murderers in Moscow. Do not interfere with my affairs."

"That's precisely what I am hinting at. Do not allow men to perish to no purpose."

They were interrupted by the entry of a very old man clad all in white, as though he had been painted by a Suzdal ikon artist. He carried a long staff in his hand.

"Keeping the vigil, my lord?"

"Welcome, Father Ivan. Whence come you?"

"Where should I come from but from hereabouts? I am observing the fast and preparing for battle."

"What do you propose to fight with? Why have you not chosen a proper weapon, father?"

"I armed myself with a cudgel, but it was too heavy. Then I tried a sword, but that, too, was too great a weight for me. Why do you keep such weapons in your store? Have you none but champion warriors among your men? In times of old we fought with lighter weapons."

Dmitri restrained himself from telling the ancient that it was not the weapons which had grown heavier but that strength had forsaken the old man.

Father Ivan stepped closer to the Prince. His brows overhung his eyes. He raised his head the better to scrutinize Dmitri. So significant and austere was his gaze that Dmitri, Vladimir, and Brenko rose to their feet. They stood on a mound above the bend of the Nepriadva facing the entire army, and these were the words they heard:

"Why have you permitted fires to be lit at night? You need fewer fires and more sentries, scouts, and patrols. The night is dark, but the wolf's eye is sharp and that of the foe even keener. He sees through a shutter at midnight and spies relentlessly from far afield at noon. Were you to slacken, trip, or carelessly turn aside, he'd pounce upon you. Then it would be of no avail to have regrets. If you wish to avoid tardy repentance, beware early."

The old man shook his finger at the Prince.

Then he impulsively approached the Grand Prince with arms spread wide and spoke in a voice quivering with emotion:

"Sovereign lord, my son, Prince Ivanovich, take care of yourself. Were you to fall, your men would be in doubt as to the victorious outcome. Stand erect and do not fall, I implore you."

"Father, how can I say to my warriors, 'Brothers, let us die for our motherland,' while I myself keep in the rear? Who then will dash forward?"

"Princes in former times did not behave thus. Actual fighting was not their task."

"That is why they were beaten."

"Make a firm stand, Dmitri."

Dmitri embraced him. One single and all-consuming passion was burning in the frail old body: victory over the Horde. This was the spirit which drove him onward while his outworn frame lagged behind. Releasing Dmitri, he stood for a while gazing earnestly at the Prince.

"Make a firm stand," he repeated.

Thereupon, bowing to the ground, he walked away.

Dmitri, who could not recall ever having enjoyed a father's endearments, who had long since forgotten the sound of his father's voice, was hard put to it to restrain his tears as he watched the old man depart. It seemed as though his own father or grandfather, the great princes Ivan, had come back to him, and not the humble shepherd Ivan.

A siren voice rose within Dmitri's heart, mellow and full of grief. This same sorrowful song was in his heart while he had ridden among his troops and had remained with him when he returned to the birch grove.

Thick fog shrouded the plain with a pall of white when dawn broke on September 8. War-horns sounded through the mist and it seemed as if the whole world reverberated with their clamour.

Soon the fog dispersed, but still the horns were blown.

The troops roused themselves, spears were raised aloft and looked for all the world like a dense forest. The upcoming sun caught the helmets, which, flaunting crimson, saffron, and rose-coloured plumes, flamed as if dawn were breaking above a blue lake.

A wind from the west fluttered the banners and feathers glittered as if they were jets of flame.

Dmitri rode past the regiments and encouraged them with these words :

"Brothers! We shall brave death together and together shall we conquer or die."

As he spoke the siren sang in his heart. He summoned the princes and other officers. When they had assembled he scanned their grey beards. Many of them were old enough to have been his father, some even to have been his grandsire. They had all been on numerous campaigns with him. Now, maybe, he was to lead them to their death.

He stood there in the full panoply of the Grand Prince. A crimson cloak covered his chain mail and steel breastplate of Byzantine workmanship. He wrapped the warm and heavy cloak round him. And still the siren song rang in his heart. Again he spoke :

"You all know my manner of life and my character. Born and bred was I among you. With you I ruled and with you I took my share of campaigning in many lands. To our foes I was a menace. I fortified our motherland. I have held you in high esteem and have loved you. I have kept you in possession of your towns and vast domains. I loved your children, sought not to harm anyone, robbed none, rebuked and dishonoured nobody. I shared in your merrymaking and your sorrows alike. Now we are faced with trials such as we have never known before. Those of us who survive must guard our motherland. Those who fall need have no anxiety as to the fate of their widows and orphans. The quick shall be the guardians of the bereaved. Should I myself fall, I bequeath to you the task of feeding the fires of our great task—the consolidation of Russia. Keep the flame of that fire burning. Fear not death, but defeat, for defeat would bring us both death and shame."

He bade farewell to each, and when only his intimates remained he called on Brenko :

"We have grown to manhood together. You were to my mother as one of her own children. Now exchange your armour for mine and take your place beneath my standard."

Brenko went pale as he doffed his own accoutrements and donned those of the Grand Prince. He threw the crimson cloak over himself and placed the tall helmet on his own head.

Thrice did they embrace. Without a backward glance Brenko bestraddled Dmitri's white charger and rode off under the huge black banner on which the image of Our Saviour was embroidered in gold—under Dmitri's own banner.

Meanwhile, rank-and-file weapons were brought to Dmitri, and with his white linen tunic and trousers he differed in no way from his soldiers.

"What do you think you are doing?" exclaimed Mikula Vasilievich with rebuke in his tone.

"I intend to fight alongside my men. This I have vowed and thus shall it be."

"But if you are killed, what will happen to the army?"

"So long as a Russian army remains I shall never die," answered Dmitri.

The spirited steed he was fond of riding to hunt was brought to him. He cantered off and took his place in the front ranks of the guards regiment. Soon

he was lost to sight among the other men, though there were many who endeavoured to follow his movements. To these his helmet seemed to glint now in one place and then in another. Each warrior might become a Dmitri. Thus even before the engagement his name was immortalized. Dmitri lived so long as a single warrior among the two hundred thousand remained alive—even the last man to fight might prove to be Dmitri.

Again the men wound their horns, and the immense eagle with outspread pinions resting on the ravines began leisurely to move forward.

The blast of the Russian war-horns found the Tatars at their cooking-pots. Kicking the cauldrons aside, gulping down the food still in their mouths, they tore off in answer to Mamai's rallying-cry.

By noon the Russians caught their first sight of the innumerable force of the Golden Horde deployed against them over a chain of mounds.

In the forefront, spread over a space of about two miles, marched the black Genoese infantry—the Franks. These were the crack regiments of mercenaries in Europe, pupils of the Adriatic commandos. They advanced, confident of victory.

Armed with short swords, and thrusting forward the serried rows of their black shields, the Franks surged on in a mighty wave, supporting on their shoulders the long spears of the row of men behind them. Blue plumes streamed from their helmets. This infantry was protected on its flanks by mounted Tatars in their thousands. The rear was held by the ruthless Kossogs, who put the curb on their mounts as they advanced silently in their shaggy headgear. Across the ridges of the hills wave upon wave of massed taciturn Hordesmen rode up. Mamai, accompanied by Bernaba, Tiulu-beg, and the senior murzas, separated himself from his troops and made for the summit of Krasni Holm.

The sound of the Russian horns melted away.

The red shields of the Russians were raised aloft.

In a complete hush, the two opposing armies drew nearer to one another.

When spear could almost touch spear, they came to a halt. No signal had so far been given to open the battle. First the enemy had to be appraised and the initial blows exchanged.

The Genoese opened their ranks to permit of the Pecheneg, Cheliu-bey, to pass. He belonged to the Kossog cavalry. He dashed forward on a spirited black stallion and galloped along the silent Tatar ranks with his face turned towards the Russians.

He was a man of such giant stature that, had he spread his legs apart, his horse could easily have passed between. Had he thrown wide his arms, he would have touched the Russian shields with his left hand and those of the Tatars with his right. His black lips grinned arrogantly above his beard, which was dyed red, and he uncovered his gleaming, savage teeth. His heavy hauberk creaked; he raised his weighty spear as though it were a blade of grass and shouted:

"Now then, who is bold enough to come forth? Villeins! Bast shoes! Straw!"

Many among the Russian forces were itching to answer the taunting challenge, but each saw how fierce and powerful was the foe. Numerous lives would be lost were battle to be joined prematurely, so the bravest of the warriors waited before taking up the Pecheneg's challenge. It was absolutely necessary to overthrow the enemy in single combat. This was the least a man could pay to the honour of the Russian army.

At this moment Alexander Peresviet, the monk from Troitsa, made his way to where Dmitri stood :

"To bring a blessing on this combat, our father, Prior Sergei, has bestowed upon me the invincible arms of the Cross and the highest monastic orders. Permit me, my lord, to test their power over the infidel."

"God be your shield," answered Dmitri.

Elbowing his path through the front line, Peresviet galloped forward into the narrow lane between the two forces.

He guided his steed past the Russian ranks to the other end of the field. As he flew, his black habit embroidered with the white crosses billowed in the wind raised by his rapid progress. Beneath the habit of his order he wore neither breastplate nor chain mail ; his chest was bare, and only a heavy iron cross beat upon it.

Both challenger and challenged wheeled their horses simultaneously and from either end of the field they charged full tilt against each other between the ranks of the onlooking armies.

Lance in rest, Peresviet thrust the weapon straight into Cheliu-bey's belly, while at the same instant Cheliu-bey's spear pierced the Russian's breast.

So fierce was the shock of the encounter that both horses dropped to their haunches.

In a twinkling Cheliu-bey's stallion, his mane outspread, galloped away, dragging the Pecheneg's corpse along in his headlong flight, for his master had not had time to disengage his foot from the stirrup.

Peresviet had not been unhorsed. He faced the Russian armies, and his mount, uttering a piercing neigh, bore its rider clinging to its neck back to the Russian positions. The monk was dead, but, even dead, he had rejoined his regiment.

A war-horn at the Grand Prince's standard bellowed like a bull. Thousands of voices roared forth in the first battle-cry. Shield clashed against shield, spear broke against spear, and the frenzied tumult of battle mingled with the neighing of horses, the clatter, clank, and thud of hoofs shook the heavens above and the earth beneath the combatants.

Mamai's infantry assaulted the centre of the guards regiment where Dmitri was fighting. His well-trained arm parried the first blows, and, seeing a rift in the ranks of the Genoese, he managed to slip through. Stubborn and ferocious hand-to-hand fighting was going on all around him.

Living men sprang on to the bodies of the wounded, but either they tripped or were wounded themselves, for they, too, fell. Not a man rose to his feet again, but his place was immediately filled by the living.

The Tatars attacked doggedly, but the Russians firmly held their ground. The place became so congested with the dead and dying that the horsemen had no room for manoeuvring. The beheaded were propped up by those who still fought, for there was nowhere they could fall to the ground. Those on foot were suffocating in the terrible turmoil.

Shields clacked and were split like eggshells by the blows. The Genoese had long since grabbed what Russian shields they could, while Genoese swords were wielded by Russians. Cavalry had come to grips with cavalry. For some time now the guards regiment had lain on the corpses of the Genoese infantry and the Grand Regiment was fighting on their bodies.

Kyrill, Timoshei, and Grisha were fighting side by side.

Three Yasi galloped up, allured by Kyrill's glittering armour. But the Tatar breastplate, or maybe the Arab steel of which it was made, withstood the

strokes of the Yasi scimitars. In the impetus of the onslaught, the first of the Yasi sprinted past, while Grisha grappled with the second. Kyrill hurled himself upon the third, stunned him, and, without giving him time to straighten, stabbed him through the neck. Dropping his weapons, the victim slipped from his saddle.

Kyrill missed his opportunity when the first Yasi wheeled and dealt a smashing jab into Grisha's shoulder with his spear. Grisha swayed, but before the spear could be released Kyrill attacked the foe from the flank, knocked him out of the saddle, betrampled him, and strangled him.

Kyrill changed his sword to his left hand and continued to fight without a shield.

Fresh Hordesmen continuously poured into the fray, and still the Russians stood firmly in close formation, leaving no room for the Tatars to make an encircling movement or an unexpected onslaught. Hemmed in on either side by ravines, Mamai could bring into the actual combat only such forces as the Russians were competent to repulse.

At this juncture Mamai decided to break Dmitri's resistance by an attack with his crack regiments of reserves. Tiulu-beg, therefore, abandoned his position on Krasni Holm and with his thousands broke through towards Dmitri's black standard.

The Grand Prince quickly noticed that the brunt of the fighting had shifted to this quarter. He was instantly on the spot. As he pushed his way through, he saw Brenko, handicapped by the Grand Princely attire he was wearing, locked in fight with an agile Tatar khan. He beat off some Tatars who blocked his passage, but closed his eyes for a moment—Tiulu-beg's blade had slashed Brenko's brow. The black standard of the Russians dropped over the bodies of the slain.

In an instant Dmitri was face to face with Tiulu-beg.

The young khan's countenance beamed with triumphant joy, for he imagined he had slain Dmitri. With a slash from his sword Dmitri knocked off the Tatar's helmet.

Tiulu-beg instantly dealt a blow at Dmitri's fore-arm, but the blade slipped off the steel wrist-guard. Their steeds collided chest to chest and began to snap at one another.

Tiulu-beg had no time to grasp his slipping blade before he was cloven asunder by Dmitri's sword.

For three hours the Russians piled up body upon body, mingling the wounded with the dead, their own folk with the enemy.

The Moscow contingent of the Grand Regiment, though pressed from both sides by the two-pronged onslaught of the Kossog cavalry, held their own. The Tatars, astonished by the Russian resistance, recoiled and hurled their full weight against the left flank.

The cover of champion warriors was broken through by the Tatars and all the available force of the Horde poured into the breach. Commander Lev Morozov raced forward. He was the first to fall.

The flanking regiment, keeping up a fierce fight, withdrew. The Olgerdovich brothers brought up the reserve, but the cavalry of the Golden Horde, led by Tash-beg, intercepted and held them back.

The regiment supporting the left flank, having lost its leaders, and receiving no help from the reserve, retreated to the Nepriadva.

The Tatars swerved away from the Don and penetrated into the breach between the reserve and the left flank. They made for the right wing, drove a

wedge between this and the reserve, hoping to isolate the two forces and then deal with them separately.

Fedor and Ivan Bielozerski, Fedor and Matislav of Tarusa, Mikula Velianinov, and Andrei Serkiz raised Dmitri's standard and dashed forward in an endeavour to reunite the contingents of the Grand Regiment and thus close the breach.

Thereupon Mamai dispatched the last of his fresh Tatar troops, composed of Haraz Turks whose mounts had grown restive with being so long held in check. Both the Bielozerski brothers, and the Princes of Tarusa, Mikula Vasilievich, Andrei Serkiz, Akim Shuba, together with hundreds of others, were slain. The Grand Regiment lost contact with the one on the right flank, was routed and fled to the river. Dmitri was swept along with the fugitives. A spear, hurled at random, pierced his horse's neck. Giving the animal no time to trample him, Dmitri sprang from the saddle and, wrenching the weapon out of the horse's neck, darted away on foot to attack the galloping Taurmen horsemen. By a sudden thrust he dislodged one of them, seized the bridle, and jumped into the saddle, which was still warm from its previous rider.

He caught a glimpse of old Ivan advancing across the plain. This ancient held his staff aloft as though it were a spear. Thus, shouting the while, he led some detachments of foot against the onrushing Tatars. All around him men fell and died. But he continued to walk on, age-old and deathless as an outraged nation.

Wheeling his steed, Dmitri parried the blows of three Taurmen who were assaulting him. The rapidity with which they rushed forward saved his life. Twice did their scimitars strike his armour—his hauberk and helmet—but the finely-wrought steel held firmly. The Taurmens were unable to restrain the impetus of their infuriated mounts and were carried such a distance that they never returned.

Witnessing the rout of the Grand Regiment, Dmitri rode swift as the wind towards the wood to take command of the ambushed units. But his way was barred by seven Tatars.

At this juncture the Grand Prince saw Kyrill. He, with Timoshei and the wounded Grisha, rushed to Dmitri's assistance.

Three of the Tatars stepped aside while the remaining four came to grips with Dmitri. Kyrill noticed that by veering his steed sharply round Dmitri unseated one of the riders. But then the three also joined in the skirmish. Kyrill and his comrades managed to intercept them. Grisha, having but one sound arm, was not able to resist for long, and was soon laid low by a thrust from an enemy spear. Another Tatar who had been wounded by Grisha hurled himself on Timoshei. Suddenly another spear glinted above Kyrill's head. Timoshei managed to parry this blow, and Kyrill, springing underneath the two spears, turned and dealt the Tatar a thrust in the back. At one and the same time two scimitars struck at Kyrill and Timoshei. Kyrill rallied, but Timoshei's sword dropped from his grasp as he slipped from the saddle on hands and knees and gently pressed his face downwards as if he were giving a last kiss to Mother Earth.

But the Tatar pulled up his steed in terror. A huge bear in armour, a helmet awry on its head, with a mighty roar sprang on to the croup of his horse and broke the Tatar in twain as though he had been an apple. The rider fell, while the frenzied horse of the steppe, panting under the weight of such an unusual burden, and lacerated by the claws of the terrified bear, careered back to its own camp on the top of Krasni hill.

Dmitri, caracolng on his charger, fought the three remaining Tatars for a long time. The steel armour he wore was dented and ripped, but still he fended off the blows and counter-attacked.

At length, overmastered by dizziness, the Grand Prince drooped forward on to the horse's neck, though he still kept his grip on its sweating sides with his knees. The steed bore him away swiftly. Then, jumping an obstacle, it pitched him out of the saddle. For a fleeting moment Dmitri caught sight of the crest of a small tree. He clasped the summit. The branch bent and, still clinging to the slippery trunk, Dmitri dropped into a soft abyss of greenery.

For three hours the ambushed regiment lay in a wood across the brook Smolka.

For three hours the scouts, trembling with fury and a sense of outrage, followed the events of the great battle.

The lookout men were perched among the branches of the tallest trees, and Vladimir Serpuhovski, who had taken up his station beneath them on his war-horse, reiterated the demand :

"What's happening now ?"

"They're advancing against the Grand Regiment."

"Well ?"

"They are fighting."

"How's it going ?"

"Good God !"

"What's up ?"

"Oh Lord !"

Serpuhovski lashed his horse. But no sooner did it answer to the whip than he reined in or guided it round a tree. The forty thousand men concealed in the wood stood breathless, tilting their heads up towards the watchers. The alder grove and the thickets on the bank of the ravine hid the battle from view ; only the noise of the combat reached their ears, now flaring up and now growing faint like the glow of a huge fire.

Silently, asking no questions, merely listening intently to the ominous din, Prince Dmitri Bobrok sat on the ground waiting for his hour to strike.

His whole life had been devoted to Dmitri : he had marched against and helped in the sack of Tver, Lithuania, Nizhni-Novgorod, Ryazan. Dmitri's downfall would mean his as well : no one would be left whom he was not willing to challenge for Moscow's sake. Russia's destiny was at stake. Her fate depended upon fresh troops arriving at the critical moment to strike a shrewd blow at the right moment. But how was he to gauge that moment ?

"Our men have bolted," the watchers called from aloft.

"They are fleeing to the Nepriadva. The Tatars are hewing them down."

"Now's the time," cried Vladimir.

Still Bobrok waited.

"What are you waiting for ?"

"Too soon."

"Why too soon ? What is there to wait for ?"

"Too soon."

"No, I'll order the attack."

"Too soon."

"But our folk are being routed."

"Wait. Sit down. Listen."

"Well ?"

"Is the shouting loud ? Those are Tatars."

"That's just the point. The Tatars are shouting loudest."

"Therefore wait. They are still near," answered Bobrok.

The watchers called out :

"The Tatars are turning our men from the Don towards the Nepriadva."

"Whither ?"

"They have turned our troops towards the Nepriadva and are pressing on the left flank."

"Have they succeeded ?"

"Yes."

"Have they turned their backs on us ?"

The Tatars' voices sounded fainter.

Bobrok rose from the ground. His heart was thumping. Clenching his fist, he calmly walked up to his charger. All eyes were now fixed on Bobrok, and no longer on the sentries in the tree-tops.

"Come down," he shouted to the watchers.

Impatiently he set foot to stirrup, nodded in the direction of the battlefield, planted himself firmly in the saddle, drew on his green gauntlets with deliberation, gave a jerk to the bridle, and, as he moved off, exclaimed :

"Now's the time !"

The restive horses, the warriors exasperated by the tedious wait, cleared the rivulet at a single bound and, crashing through the branches, emerged on to the open plain.

The Tatars, intoxicated by the pursuit, had scattered into numerous units and, with their backs turned to the Smolka, were fighting the remnants of the Russian regiments.

Mamai, scanning the conflict from the mound, suddenly perceived that his troops, which had been pressing on towards the Nepriadva, had come to a halt and seemed to be undecided as to what they should do. Also the din of battle had abruptly ceased and the Tatars were turning back. The khan looked at Bernaba with amazement. Pale and with chattering teeth, Bernaba was staring at the battlefield.

The Genoese infantry was on the run, dissolving like a wave when it breaks upon the seashore. Rolling over the Genoese came a wave of irresistible Kossogs, followed by a stream of howling Tatars. And leading this frenzied mass, a maddened horse of the steppes came hurtling towards the khan's headquarters, carrying a roaring bear encased in armour upon its back.

The Russians, who had barely escaped being pushed into the Nepriadva, halted, and with a rousing cheer started in pursuit of the retreating Tatars.

It was only at this moment that Mamai saw the fresh Russian cavalry come galloping out of the wood, splashing the coats of the Taurmens and knocking off the black fur caps of the Kossogs.

Bobrok's attack in the rear of the Tatars failed to stop the foe. Only a section of the enemy wheeled about in the direction of Krasni Holm ; the great mass continued their headlong gallop towards the Nepriadva, tearing past the Russians, who made way for them. They no longer were in pursuit of but in flight from the Russians.

The banks of the river were steep, the river itself was deep, the armour heavy. In the fierceness of the combat all the various troops became hopelessly entangled : Yasi, Burtasi, Turks, Kossogs, Genoese, and Taurmen—all went hurtling down into the Nepriadva and were drowned.

The river ceased to flow.

The living dam was still moving, throwing up horses' hoofs or the arms or heads of the great army of the Golden Horde.

Only those who used the corpses of their comrades as a ford got across the river Nepriadva.

The blow was sudden. That had been one of Ghenghis-khan's precepts. And the fresh Russian cavalry, pressing the enemy hard and giving him no time to recover or to breathe, set off in pursuit, annihilating the enemy as he ran. Thus had Russia fulfilled the three precepts of Ghenghis-khan.

Mamai ran to his charger.

He seized the pommel with a trembling hand, but the horse kept wheeling round, and the khan had great difficulty in laying hold of the stirrup. Mamai panted as he endeavoured to climb into the saddle while the steed was prancing. Then he was borne away full tilt in the wake of Bernaba and the murzas.

Behind them could be heard the thunderous pounding of the retreating cavalry, the clank of sabres that caught up with them, and the awe-inspiring war-whoop of the pursuing Russians.

Vladimir Serpuhovski, rallying the remnants of the Russian contingents, led them to the assault of Krasni Holm. Then he crossed the chain of mounds and galloped through the Tatar bivouacs, noting with amazement the overturned cauldrons and their spilled contents of mutton, which was still warm.

The huge eagle, bloodstained and torn, but powerful once again, flew over the plain on which this very day quiet camps had been pitched. The men rode over the hot embers from the night's fires, over tumbled waggons and transports, past droves of terrified horses sheltering in the woods, roaring and frenzied camels which trampled on their erstwhile masters. In front there were flocks of bleating sheep and herds of bellowing bullocks. Ahead, the enemy was no longer to be seen, for he had been trampled beneath the hoofs of the victors.

Vladimir stopped the pursuit and led his men back to Kulikovo Plain.

Dmitri Bobrok, however, took his fresh troops from their ambush to where the Taurmen, the Tatars, and Mamai himself were endeavouring to make good their escape.

The Russians pursued them to the Krasivaia Mecha, to the Kuzmin Road, to the old hut where Mamai's carpets still hung.

The same fate awaited Mamai's warriors on the Krasivaia Mecha as had overtaken their comrades on the Vozha and the Nepriadva—the weight of their armour dragged them down into the waters.

At Mamai's headquarters Bobrok was presented with a bowl of solid gold which had been left behind by the khan.

Bobrok, raising it to his eyes in the blood-red glow of the setting sun, read the inscription, which was in Greek :

"This is the cup of Grand Prince Mstislav Romanovich of Galicia. To him who drinks herefrom comes health and the destruction of his enemies."

Mstislav of Galicia had fallen in the battle of Kalka a hundred and fifty years before this day. The goblet had been brought from thence to the Horde. Now it was on its way home.

Bobrok was lost in meditation. Frantic, panic-stricken remnants of Mamai's forces were still in headlong flight in front of him ; the khan himself was with them. The Russian cavalry was still sufficiently swift to overtake them. They could be overtaken and annihilated, so that not so much as a hair, not so much as a breath, would be left in the world of these innumerable and unconquerable forces. But night was drawing on and the steppe lay ahead, and in the steppe was neither shelter nor food.

So Bobrok issued the order to turn back.

Once more they rode along the river Ptania. Fragments of shields and rubbish floated downstream. All along the river bank the way was bestrewn with Tatar corpses. Twenty-odd miles were travelled among these dead men. The Russians rode back in the gathering dusk watching the dwindling streak of sunset growing narrower and fainter.

The warriors who had all that long day lain in ambush, silent and motionless, who had been excited by the battle and exalted by victory, now felt urged to sing and talk in the gloaming. Yet none could decide whether it would be seemly in the presence of such widespread death to talk and to sing. They were afraid to inquire of Bobrok, for he rode stern and silent at their head.

He was bringing to Dmitri the golden cup left behind by Mamai and he did not even know whether the man to whom he was bringing it was alive or dead.

Chapter XLVIII

AFTER THE VICTORY

AFTER THE PURSUIT WAS FINISHED VLADIMIR SERPUHOVSKI RETURNED TO Kulikovo when day was on the wane and ordered the war-horns to sound the roll-call. Above the corpse-strewn plain the heavy black standard, torn and scarred, was once again raised aloft. Again the horns, though battered by enemy scimitars, uttered their deep, hoarse, and groaning bellow. But the dead lay as they had fallen.

From all over the plain warriors rallied round Vladimir. Some leant on swords or spears, others greatly needed the support of their comrades. Still the contingents continued to muster; kinsman greeted kinsman, friends welcomed friends. Others scanned the battlefield with anxious eyes trying to pick up a trace of their own men. Yet others shouted the names of those they hoped to see, but their voices were drowned in the clamour of the horns, and at the blast of these horns all who had strength to move came to the rallying-place.

Holmski, with his beard chopped off and a battered eye, galloped up. Followed the brothers Olgerdovich, who embraced Vladimir. Their strong armour was dented and covered with blood as though rust had eaten into it. The men and the very soil exuded the stench of blood and iron. Young Prince Novosilski also put in an appearance. His face, which had remained unscathed throughout the battle, was furrowed by the first wrinkles, which lay upon him like blue scars. And still the horns continued to blare. The wounded were brought to the rallying-place by those who had escaped. They brought with them curiosities found on slain Tatars and led captured horses by the bridle.

"Where is my brother?" asked Vladimir of the Olgerdovich brothers.

"I think I saw him," answered Novosilski. "He was at grips with four Tatars, but I was unable to get through to him."

Old Ivan the shepherd pushed his way to Vladimir, brushing aside the surrounding troopers. His white trousers were stained up to the knees with dark blood. Long had he wandered about the plain, encouraging the fighters and seeking for the Grand Prince. He addressed himself to Vladimir with austerity:

"Where is he?"

"He is not here," replied Vladimir. Thereupon he ordered the horns to be silenced and called in a loud voice across the plain: "Dmitri!"

A hush ensued while all ears were strained to catch the responding cry.

"Prince!"

In one bound Novosilski jumped his horse over the piled-up bodies and hastened to the spot where Dmitri had last been seen fighting.

One wounded trooper belonging to the Grand Prince's guard had seen a tall warrior in a battered coat-of-mail with a heavy spear in his hand advancing with difficulty and alone against the dashing Tauromen cavalry. That warrior had been Dmitri.

Someone proffered the information that farther towards the front the Grand Prince lay among a heap of the slain.

Vladimir, the lesser commanders, and many of the warriors hastened in the direction indicated. To ride up to the spot was impossible, for the bodies were piled into mounds, groans and moaning could be heard from beneath the dead. The riders therefore dismounted and went on foot, stepping over the slain.

Among the trampled grass, shielding with his broad chest another slain warrior, lay the corpse of a man in rich armour.

Vladimir, his heart faint within him, bowed over the calm, dead lips.

But the man he looked upon was young Ivan Bielozerki. His eyes were closed as if in reverie. His father's body lay beneath him so that even in death it seemed as if the younger man had tried to shield the older from the fatal blow.

"God rest thy soul, Prince Ivan."

Anyone who was clad in splendid armour was mistaken for Dmitri. Among the killed were the Princes Fedor and Mstislav Tarusa, the Tsarevich Andrei Serkiz, the Grand Prince's kinsman Mikula Veliaminov, Mihail Andreich Brenko, Valui Okatiev. . . .

Dmitri was nowhere to be found.

Then the seekers caught sight of a native of Kostroma, Grigori Holopischev, who came running and panting over the plain. He was shouting himself hoarse and rolled his eyes in grief.

"Here, here!" he cried.

He had evidently found Dmitri.

Andrei Polotski hurried towards Grigori.

"How is he?"

Breathing with difficulty, the warrior took off his helmet, saying:

"Killed! O Lord God!"

"Where?"

Grigori was given a horse, and all galloped after him in the direction of the copse on the bank of the Smolka.

There, another native of Kostroma, Fedor Sabur, was on his knees beside Dmitri and was endeavouring to raise his massive body. The Grand Prince had been discovered under a fallen birch tree on the slope of a ravine. His armour was battered, his helmet shattered, his chain mail torn, while in his hand he still firmly grasped the hilt of his broken sword.

"He is alive," said Sabur. "He is still breathing."

Everyone dismounted and gathered round. Vladimir gave the order that the Grand Prince's armour be removed. Sabur seized a dagger, and straightway slit the straps. Dmitri's body emerged from its prison of steel as from a narrow shell. No sign of blood was on the white tunic. Dmitri had been stunned by blows, but the enemy's weapons could not pierce Russian armour. Water was brought from the Smolka. His head was bathed and he was given a few sips, which he swallowed.

"He's actually swallowed!"

Instantly all were silent, and the warriors stepped back. Dmitri opened his eyes.

He looked round dazed and sombre.

"My lord," exclaimed Vladimir.

Dmitri recognized him.

"You are alive, my lord!"

Dmitri raised himself, full of apprehension. Vladimir seized him by the hand and helped him to his feet.

"Dmitri, we have won, we have won!"

Dmitri uttered no word, but scanned the faces of those grouped about him.

"Give me a horse," he said at last.

Holmski quickly led up his own charger.

"Take mine, my lord. We know not where to seek out another white one."

The horse was bespattered with blood, but otherwise it was sound in wind and limb.

Dmitri, still tottering, approached the charger, laid a heavy hand on the pommel and placed his foot in the stirrup. Thus he stood awhile with head bent, feeling the ground reel beneath him and seeing the beast as through a mist. Suddenly he recovered his balance, flung himself into the saddle, and smiled. At last he felt buoyant again, and the dead weight which had pressed so crushingly on his shoulders and breast rolled away.

"Thank you, brothers."

Stooping from the saddle, he enfolded in his arms the brothers Olgerdovich, Vladimir, Holmski, the trooper Sabur, and Grigori Holopischev, whose countenance was wreathed in smiles.

They all followed him across the wide plain, over the grass, now alight with the sunset glow. The white horse's legs became dark and moist to the knees from the blood-drenched grass.

When Dmitri came to the place where the bodies of the Bielozerkis lay, he paused and looked down at them in silence. From childhood they had so often been together; now their dreams of coming to grips with the age-old foe had been accomplished. He kissed Brenko's blood-stained face.

"It seems to have been foreordained that you fall here between the Don and the Dneiper, on the Kulikovo Plain, near the Nepriadva river, among the feather-grass. You have laid down your lives for our Russian motherland."

The Grand Prince's mantle had become hard and heavy as leather with blood; this and his golden helmet and other harness were removed from Brenko's body and Dmitri donned them anew.

He cast his eyes over the endless expanse. On every hand there were dead bodies, homespun clothing showed up white, heavy armour sparkled in the flaming sunset.

Terrible indeed was it to have to listen to the unceasing groans and cries, to see the wounded crawling towards him out of the blackened grass.

"Forgive me, brothers. Give me your blessing."

He rode up to the bodies of men he had known, halting beside them and scanning their darkened faces.

"So your dancing days are over, Timoshei?" he asked softly, calling back to memory the songs, the smile, and the bear.

"There's a man here lying unconscious," said some approaching warriors.

"He looks like a prince, judging by his accoutrements. But we can't place him. He is wearing a valuable ring."

In the gloaming it was hard to distinguish faces while mounted on horseback. Dmitri drew closer to where Kyrill lay.

Kyrill sensed the Grand Prince's scrutiny. He raised his lids and the two men's eyes met. Kyrill's heavy coat-of-mail had been pierced by a spear-thrust under the breast. It oppressed him. A wound dealt by a scimitar gaped on his head.

"So you are alive, Prince!" Kyrill said, and closed his eyes again.

"Cut away his straps," ordered Dmitri. Then, turning to Vladimir, he added: "I cannot recall where I have met this man before."

Kyrill was released from his armour and soon revived. The Grand Prince noticed that he was wearing a precious ring, and inquired:

"Who are you? Why do I not know you?"

"You do know me, my lord. I helped to build the Tainitski Tower. Since then I have been a fugitive, hiding from your wrath."

"Was it you, then, that the late Mihail Andreich was seeking with Bobrok's ring as a clue?"

"Then Mihail Andreich is among the dead?"

Dmitri crossed himself in silence, while Kyrill held out his hand, saying:

"As for the ring—here it is. I can't pull it off."

"Keep it." And to the troops he added: "Do what you can for him."

Dmitri was moving away when Kyrill called out:

"Prince!"

"What is it, brother?"

"What sort of brothers are we? I'm laid low in the dust while you are on horseback. Does it please you to see so many of us laid thus low?"

"You are weak but fierce. Humble your pride, for the hour of death is cruel and close at hand. Lie still. Henceforth life will be changed from what it has been. There is no need to drag the old sins into the new life. When you have recovered you shall build again. Maybe we shall no longer need towers but shall raise up mansions without surrounding walls and barbicans in the open country, with never a fear of attack by the foe."

He touched his horse.

Kyrill raised himself.

"Mansions he says! And upon whose bones?"

Dmitri was, however, out of earshot, and Kyrill dropped back on to the grass.

The Grand Prince rode on towards the expectant troops.

Rumour had outpaced him and everyone knew that he was alive. Nevertheless they were surprised to see him coming to them mounted on horseback and wearing his panoply of war as of old.

The joyful and thunderous clamour of the men at sight of the living Dmitri sounded as awe-inspiring as had the first war-cry of the great battle. The men beat their swords on their shields and tossed their spears in the air.

"Glory, glory to you, Prince Dmitri!"

Vladimir Serpuhovski came into their range of vision.

"Glory to you, gallant Vladimir, our deliverer!"

There was no stopping the cheers of the multitude.

At last Dmitri called out to them:

"Brothers, where is our enemy? He is laid low, scattered like dust before a storm. Mamai, you have failed to emulate Batu-khan. You marched against Russia with twelve different Hordes and seventy princes. Now you are in flight across the nocturnal steppe or perchance you have been trampled down by

horses' hoofs. Has Russia, then, treated you so badly? There are no princes or commanders with you. Have you drunk overmuch of the rapid waters of the Don? Or have you eaten overmuch on Kulikovo Plain? Henceforth the road to Russia is closed to you, and this for ever. Let your ways be dark and abject! Brothers, I see your bleeding wounds. They shall be to you as an undying glory of the day when you fed the Horde from the tips of your spears and when you put your guests to sleep among the feather-grass with your swords. Glory, glory also to those who will lie here for all eternity."

And the warriors yelled after him:

"Glory!"

Bobrok returned at dawn.

During the night waggons had already set forth laden with treasure that had once been the property of the Golden Horde. Flocks of sheep and droves of camels and horses were driven across the plain. Captive women, with long slits of eyes and swarthy complexions, were being led along together with prisoners and tamed golden eagles. This was the booty seized from the khan's transport baggage train.

Bobrok, learning from Serpuhovski that Dmitri was alive, rode towards the Grand Prince's tent, taking with him the golden goblet from Galicia.

Day was breaking. Suddenly and for the first time Bobrok saw the Kulikovo Plain in the feeble light of the rising sun. How utterly different it was from the one on which he had lain down to listen to what the earth had to tell him.

He had seen many fields after a grim battle.

He came to a halt.

The entire plain resounded with the murmur of groans and weeping. And over it a rosy mist was rising. Was it tinted by all the blood which had been shed?

He thrust the cup back into his belt and turned his horse's head towards the spot where his troopers were lighting their camp fires.

Chapter XLIX

KAFFA

MAMAI SUCCEEDED IN CROSSING THE KRASIVAIA MECHA BY THE GUSINI FORD, BUT he had no time to make a halt.

He was in a panic of fear lest one of his own warriors, out of servility to Dmitri, should betray him. He separated himself from the bulk of the fugitives and, accompanied by Bernaba with seven murzas, hastened to Riaski Plain.

Bernaba suggested seeking refuge in Ryazan.

"You do not know Oleg," replied Mamai.

He knew well enough that Oleg would be only too delighted to deliver Mamai up to Moscow. A welcome gift indeed would he be to Dmitri, and one which the Grand Prince would certainly not refuse. But Oleg himself in company with Jagiello was in flight towards Odoiev. Following Oleg, and accompanied by Fedor and the rest of the family, came Efronisia, also making all speed to leave Ryazan behind. Oleg had promised to await their arrival at Believ. Oleg's mentality was such that were he in Dmitri's shoes he would have burned down Ryazan without a qualm.

On the eve of the second day of their flight Mamai plucked up sufficient

courage to dismount. They concealed themselves in a thicket, but feared to light a fire. The horses were panting, their legs all a-tremble, their veins swelled, and blood was oozing from their hocks. No one dared to peep under the saddles, for by the pommels were gaping wounds. The poor beasts refused to eat grass, but indolently nibbled the coarse willow leaves.

Suddenly the fugitives were on the alert and again flung themselves into their saddles. They did not spare the lash, but galloped downstream along the Don : they had distinctly heard the neighing, snorting, and thud of horses' hoofs. As bad luck would have it, Bernaba's horse had neighed in response.

No sooner did they halt again than the crackling of broken bushes, the heavy tread of horses' feet, and shrill equine cries revealed the proximity of the pursuers. Once more they set off at a gallop, changing routes, floundering among copses and ravines which lay between the frequent woodland streams and rivulets.

At last their strength gave out. Old Murza Turgan, a descendant of Ghenghis-khan, rolled into the grass in a dead faint. No one stopped to raise him. They all raced on to put as great a distance as possible between themselves and the foe, to confuse their tracks.

It seemed, however, as if some woodland sprites were in league with the enemy and were revealing to him the hiding-places of the exhausted, fear-ridden khan. No sooner did they come to a halt than they could hear the dull, relentless sound of pursuing horsemen.

"Our mounts cannot carry us any farther," said Bernaba.

"Let's make a bolt for it," shouted Mamai, scurrying into the brushwood. Too late ! They were surrounded by neighing, screaming, stampeding hordes.

Utterly nonplussed, the khan stopped : for three days they had been fleeing before Tatar horses which had been careering after them from Kulikovo Plain. These horses, saddled and badly bruised, had escaped from the battle alive and had been following the trail of their pasture comrades.

One of the beasts was slaughtered. A fire was lighted, and for the first time since their flight had begun the men tasted roasted meat. Ahead still lay the vast and desolate steppe.

Many days later, dirty, in tattered garments, and having lost their belts and skull-caps, they approached Sarai on foot.

Was it seemly for a khan to return from a campaign in such a state ? They resolved to wait till dusk and to enter the city under cover of the early autumn darkness.

"We shall be taken for Bokhara dervishes and shall get through somehow."

They made a wide circuit of the city walls and found their way to the cemetery. Here they decided to lie low. They were astounded at the number of freshly-made graves in the burial ground. All the eastern side, the one nearest the town, was covered with newly-dug earth piled up anyhow.

Mamai sent one of the murzas, saying :

"Your appearance is so greatly altered, you have grown so black-visaged, you are so unkempt and dirty, that none will recognize you. May Allah be merciful to you ! Go, find out what is afoot over there."

The murza set forth. They waited long for his return, but he did not come back.

Offering up prayers to Allah for the success of this mission, Mamai sent another murza, but he, too, did not return.

At last, when the sun had dipped below the horizon, Mamai himself started.

No one hailed or stopped him at the gates; no one so much as cast a look at him or his companions. But when he had passed through, the khan heard the sneering, drawling voice of the sentry saying:

"Seems as though those are some more of Mamai's men!"

The khan dared not look back. What could have happened? Could the disaster already be known here? And if so, why did no one hasten to assist the weary warriors?

Mamai reached the small house where his treasures lay hid. All was quiet in the yard. He lifted a forged copper hammer which hung on the plane tree gates. He stood there with Bernaba, hesitating whether to knock.

Bernaba alone knew of the existence of this little house. The khan who had deposed many khans had had it built secretly in the shadow of the city walls, not far from the market-place, for use as a hiding-place in the event of a possible attempt to depose him.

The groom who opened the gate started violently. He would not have recognized the khan had not Bernaba been standing behind him as usual.

They entered and locked themselves in securely.

The groom told them that when Mamai had led forth all the troops against Russia, and when the army had advanced so far that it was impossible for it to return, the Zaiantsk khan Tohtamish approached Sarai, seized the undefended city, together with many more camps and tents, slew Mamai's friends as a warning, and had now installed himself as ruler of the Golden Horde.

"Where now can I put my hand upon the troops to evict him?" Mamai reflected.

While the Genoese was cogitating:

"I cannot bring myself to go over to Tohtamish's side; neither will I join Dmitri; Oleg is useless to me. Who, then, remains? There's only Mamai."

"Khan," said Bernaba, "no one knows we are here—unless one or all your murzas should go to pay homage to Tohtamish. They will say to him: 'Mamai's in the city, take us on, reinstate us in our former positions at the Horde, and we shall serve you loyally. As an earnest of our faith in you we shall deliver up into your hands the luckless Mamai.'"

Mamai turned green with rage. Why had he not cut the throats of all these murzas while travelling with them across the steppe? Bernaba was right. But the khan's wrath suddenly cooled, for it dawned on him that at this very minute Tohtamish was already lending a willing ear to the traitors' insinuations. There was no time to be lost.

"What had we better do?" he inquired of Bernaba.

"Collect the treasure, carry away everything we can, and make good our escape from here."

"But where to?"

"To our city of Kaffa. There you will be out of reach and have time to consider the situation."

"Escape?"

Throughout the night they packed the treasures looted by the Horde from north, west, and south—treasures which Mamai in his turn had robbed from the Horde. When morning broke over the market-place, with its motley, jostling, noisy crowds, Mamai and Bernaba with a few servants led forth their caravan and took the familiar road to the estuary of the Volga.

For many days they pushed on through a cloud of dust.

Once the Volga lay in the rear Mamai's fears were allayed. When, far away in the distance, snow-capped summits, ethereal as clouds, appeared against

the sky, Mamai was jubilant. The treasures, for which he had committed murder and robbery, had spent so many sleepless nights, had endured hardships, betrayed his friends, and grown old in wickedness, were safe with him. These treasures would give him power, for the gold, the scintillating and precious stones, the rugs of golden tissue, the rare armour and weapons, would enable him to levy new troops, defeat Tohtamish, take over the latter's forces and become once again the "great khan" of the Golden Horde.

In the steppes of the Azov seaboard they encountered such terrific gales that even the camels lay down and refused to move on. But Mamai insisted and urged the camel-drivers to fresh efforts.

He held his head high when at last he caught sight of the mighty stone walls and tall round towers of Kaffa descending towards the sea.

Bernaba, however, grew apprehensive.

"Do not chafe, khan. Better lie low for a time. I know of a secluded spot where we can live. It is safe there. We'll have time to look around."

They went down into a suburb where many a garden flourished and thence on into the narrow stone alleyways of Kaffa.

Here, within one of the walled enclosures, they unloaded the caravan, and Mamai took up his dwelling in a top room over the stores.

A view of the sea could be had from the roof. The lane ran down to the water's edge. A carefree fisherman sang as he baled water out of his boat.

In the little enclosures below, raw fish was drying on poles in the sun. Flaming bunches of paprika hung from lines stretched across the yard. Each little yard opened into the adjacent one, for here no one hid from one another as they did in the Horde, no one made his homestead into a fortress against his neighbour as was the custom in Sarai.

Here a man could breathe freely. Even the massive city walls glowed blue in the sunshine as though they were built of glass instead of stone.

Bernaba vowed that he was busily engaged upon organizing a campaign to make a sweep against Tohtamish. He went out early every morning. The enclosure remained empty, for people seldom came to the place. Bernaba had chosen well. Only the Greek innkeeper, a voluble idler, annoyed Mamai.

"What wares have you brought, merchant?"

"Gold," answered Mamai fiercely. But seeing the avid glint in his interlocutor's eyes, he bit his lip and added hastily: "I mean, of course, wheat."

"Why do you not sell it?"

"I'm waiting for it to fetch a good price."

"Why wait? Prices are falling."

"That's precisely why I'm waiting."

"Then it stands to reason that you are wealthy, since you can afford to wait," commented the Greek, putting two and two together respectfully.

Bernaba returned in the evening. All at once the thought flashed through Mamai's mind that perhaps Tohtamish had already laid hands on one of his wives—the one with eyebrows like a swift on the wing. Frenzy seized him. In his present condition, barefooted, unarmed, disguised as a merchant, he would gladly have rushed to Sarai and snatched his beauty from the other's insolent embrace. Though he had had her for two years, he still had not grown tired of her. He had longed for her on the march into Russia, regretted having taken so many wives with him while leaving her behind. Still, she was there in Sarai, whereas those others were captives in Moscow.

Mamai almost choked with rage as he sat alone on the flat roof of the hostelry gazing at sunlit Kaffa.

"Here, you," he shouted at Bernaba, "how much longer have I to wait? Tomorrow I shall start by myself."

Bernaba lowered his eyes and answered:

"Haste is only necessary when one is catching fleas."

He had found suitable words wherewith to comfort Mamai. The Genoese was an adept in such arts.

That night a woman wrapped in a black shawl walked out of Mamai's room. Bernaba hastened to enter before the khan could close the door upon her.

Mamai started back, but his fears were allayed as soon as he recognized who his visitor was.

"Any news?" he asked.

"Yes," cried Bernaba, sticking a knife into Mamai's throat.

Bernaba remained with the dead man till dawn. He searched every nook and cranny, being well acquainted with Mamai's cunning and prudence. He discovered a small bag of rubies hidden under the doorstep. Diamonds had been sewn into the seams of coats, and ingots of gold wrapped in the khan's girdle. He thrust heavy silver sabre-hilts set with precious stones into his belt. The blades had been broken off. He hung a pouch filled with emeralds round his neck.

Early on the morrow he sent the innkeeper into town to do some marketing, followed him, and summoned a few of his Genoese compatriots. They slung the bags across the donkeys' backs, and the animals, tapping their little hoofs over the cobbles, quickly brought the khan's treasures to the seashore.

A tarred vessel rode at anchor in the distance. Her sails were set. The men started to load the bags into a boat.

"They are too heavy," said the owner of the craft.

"The sea is calm. She will float all right."

The last bag was heaved aboard and they pushed off. The overloaded boat at first shipped water, but then righted herself.

Bernaba sat at the helm, as had been his wont in boyhood. The men took to the oars.

The wide green stony coast of Kaffa, where he had dreamed and experienced so much, was left behind. Ahead lay the ship. Yet farther ahead was Byzantium the Magnificent, full of promise of life to him who possessed wealth. Long had he awaited this day. The slow rise and fall of the oars and the sluggish motion of the overladen boat irritated him.

A wave splashed over the gunwale and wetted Bernaba's feet. He turned about to face the oncoming waves. They rolled up from the open sea, breaker on breaker, crested with gleaming white horses. This reminded him of Kulikovo, when formation after formation of Russians in sparkling armour advanced on Krasni Holm. He recollected the Greek words he had formerly uttered to the khan.

"He who repudiates gifts will himself offer gifts."

But Mamai, knowing no Greek, had paid no attention.

Another wave struck the boat, spending itself over the gunwale.

"We'll have to throw the bags overboard," cried the boatman, "or we shall sink."

"Overboard? My bags?" yelled Bernaba, hurling himself upon them. "That we cannot do. We'll be all right," he shouted.

But the boat, having lost her rudder, swung broadside on to the waves and filled rapidly.

"We're sinking!" exclaimed the boatman.

They struck out in an endeavour to swim, but the waters encompassed them and they were still too far from the ship and already too far from land. Bernaba's coat was heavy with the gold and precious stones he had thrust into it.

Dragged down by the weight, the Genoese sank to the bottom of the sea.

Chapter L

REUNION

FOR NINE DAYS DMITRI REMAINED ON KULIKOVO PLAIN, SORTING OUT FRIEND from foe, wounded from dead.

For three days the waters of the Don ran dark with blood.

Forty thousand men were alive out of the whole two hundred thousand who had come but so short a time ago, and the number of Tatars slain was even greater.

A deep common grave was being dug.

It was announced to the Grand Prince that an envoy from Oleg of Ryazan had arrived with a letter and gifts.

"Moscow has never borrowed wisdom from Ryazan," said Dmitri with a sigh. "He can wait. I have other matters to think of."

Two warriors approached.

One of the sentries barred their way with his long heavy spear.

"Where are you going?"

"To see Dmitri Ivanovich."

"In whose name?"

"Just ourselves, on our own account."

"Go to your commander. If he deems it necessary he will communicate directly with our lord. Fine sort of envoys you are! Intruders!"

Dmitri overheard this interchange, and asked:

"What do they want?"

"To see you, my lord."

"Why not let them through? They are not infidels."

The sentry was crestfallen.

Dmitri went up to the warriors.

"What do you want?"

"Well, you see, my lord Dmitri Ivanovich, it's like this. There was a shepherd of yours here, an old man. He is dead."

"Ivan?"

"Yes, yes!"

"Did he die a natural death?"

"All yesterday he sat listening, always listening. Ay, listening to all we talked about. Then he went off to listen on the plain. He told us that he was going to your tent to listen if you were sleeping."

"And what did he find me doing?"

"He said you were sitting with Dmitri Mihailovich Bobrok talking about some golden cup or the other—that this same cup had come back to you. So he stood there awhile, then joined us again, told us of it and then lay down. And when, in the morning, we looked at him, he was dead."

"Let us go to him," said Dmitri.

From one end to the other of the plain, as though it were harvesting time, the

place teemed with men in white tunics who had discarded their armour. They were bending to pick up the dead and carry them to the spot selected for burial.

The wounded sat in groups. They sprinkled their wounds with ashes from the enemy's camp fires, dressed their wounds with medicinal leaves and herbs. Some lay staring up at the sky. Wandering among the wounded were bent, grey-haired old women; whether they were leeches or wise women it was hard to tell. Other leeches were at work with little bags of healing remedies hanging from their belts. Large flocks of crows wheeled above the tops of the distant trees waiting until all the men would forsake the place.

Dmitri followed the troopers, who had also discarded their weighty harness.

"There he is," they said, pointing to the spot.

Old Ivan lay in the shade of a bush, arms outstretched and palms upward. The long, frayed staff was beneath his elbow. His eyes were closed as though in sleep. The wrinkles were smoothed away. A gentle, half-roughish smile lit his face, as though at last he saw the light he had sought for all his life.

Many men had gathered round him. Such a death on this field of death struck them with wonder. That a man should have been found who had died a natural death in this place was commented upon by all ranks.

Dmitri ordered that Ivan should be laid to rest in the common, fraternal grave, on the top of all the others, and that the staff should be taken to the armourer.

"Tell him to fix a spearhead to it. I intend to give it to my son Vasili with injunctions to take care of it."

While the grave was being filled in Dmitri attended the office for the dead.

The pale-blue fumes of incense rose heavenwards, and Dmitri's thoughts were with those who, like smoke, had vanished for ever.

There they lay beneath the fresh, black, damp sod, all together, known and unknown, while the priest prayed for them:

"O Lord, give rest to the souls of those who fell in this battle: to Fedor, Ivan, Fedor, Klim, Tomofei, Grigori, and the many others whose names, O Lord, thou knowest; those who in this bitter and awful hour drank of the cup of death in battle. . . ."

The choir took up the antiphony:

"And to all their troops who, in faith and truth, fell for our great motherland. . . ."

"May the memory of them be kept for all eternity," murmured Dmitri.

The grass rustled behind him. He turned and saw that Bobrok had come up.

"All of us have to die," said Dmitri.

"That's not the question just now," answered Bobrok.

"To my way of thinking, what matters is that we lead an honourable life."

"I agree. Were a man to perform but one good deed he would have justified his life."

Bobrok, while lending an ear to the words of the requiem, stood behind Dmitri lost in recollections.

It was not by an unpremeditated act that Dmitri had placed him in command of the ambushed regiment; the Grand Prince had counted on winning the day without calling upon the ambushed force to aid him; he did not want it said that the victory had been planned by Bobrok. . . . Nonetheless, nothing would have been achieved had it not been for Bobrok. Even at the time the thought had flashed through his mind that no one harboured ideas so alien to him, Bobrok, as did Dmitri. Yet events had played into Bobrok's hands—the fate of victory had depended upon him. And when it had been achieved he instantly

forgot every affront, for a warrior lives to conquer. Only now, as he stared at Dmitri's back, he remembered, and, stepping forward, so as to avoid the sight of that back, he took up his stand beside Dmitri.

Together they watched the whorls of incense dissolving into the air; together they heard the jingling of armour behind them, the thousands of warriors who were praying and also meditating as they listened to the ancient hymns which brought those who were left alive into such close contact with the comrades who had gone before and for ever.

When Dmitri returned to his tent he was accosted by Vladimir Andreich:

"It appears that the boyar from Ryazan is urgent in his request to have audience with you."

"Very well, you can summon him."

Boyar Boris Zerno bowed low before Dmitri.

"State your business," said the Grand Prince.

"My liege lord, the great Prince of Ryazan, Oleg Ivanovich, sends you greeting. He bade me express his profound joy in that you have overthrown the infidel and have thus exalted our Russia on a shield of glory. He trusts that you will extend your clemency towards him as an elder brother towards his younger. He begs that you forget all previous offences and he promises that henceforth he will act as a younger brother to you. . . ."

"Where is he?"

"He fled to Lithuania, fearing your wrath. Together with Jagiello, he has now reached Odoiev."

"Had he really trusted in clemency, he would not have fled."

"He bade me tell you that he held parley with Mamai, not out of spite towards you but for the sake of Ryazan. While negotiating with the khan, he firmly resolved to stand by, not to fight, and not to harm you in any way. He sends you gifts. We implore you to accept them and to bury the past in eternal oblivion."

"And what were Jagiello the Lithuanian, with all his compatriots and Polish forces, and your own Oleg Ivanovich, with all his councillors, thinking of previously? What were they negotiating about? Oleg's duty was not to wait and see, but to join us. Then we could have buried all the harm he has done us. It is my turn to wait now. Tell him so. Take back your gifts. Your fugitive prince will have many expenses, he'll need the gifts more urgently than I shall."

The boyar turned pale and, glancing curiously at Dmitri, bowed himself out.

Long did Dmitri follow him with his eyes. So Oleg, the renegade, had changed his mind? Who would be next? Probably all realized now that they should keep together.

When the last rites had been performed, the last lamentations hushed, the army started the return march to Moscow, Suzdal, Tver, Kostroma. . . .

The men carried their banners, now torn, slashed, and drooping heavily. The wounded were piled in the long creaking Tatar waggons. The dark coats which a short while ago served to keep the enemy warm were rolled up to be used as pillows and over them were spread coats and horsecloths. Tatarfelt rugs and matting covered the men to keep out the rain and dew. Slowly, lagging behind the main army, the convoy of sick and groaning men wended its way.

On the high road to Moscow the entire population of the Ryazan town of Dubok came out to meet Dmitri. Fearing Oleg's wrath, they had not the courage to cheer the Grand Prince.

Bareheaded and silent they knelt on either side of the road, neither bowing

nor lowering their heads. But across the highway they had stretched an embroidered table-runner and had placed thereon a loaf of black bread with a golden salt-cellar on top. The offering was meant as a gift from the whole population of Ryazan territory, and not merely from the town of Dubok.

Dmitri dismounted in the middle of the road. He approached, took the bread in his hands, and touched its coarse crust with his lips, saying:

"I thank thee, land of Ryazan."

One old man pressed his face to the ground so as not to utter the words that were bursting to be said in greeting to the conqueror of the Golden Horde.

The army moved on once more. None of the inhabitants of Dubok stirred so long as any of Dmitri's commanders passed by.

Kyryl's head ached violently. At times he lapsed into semi-consciousness and muttered incoherently. Had he known how, he would have wept, would have complained. But there was no one to listen to him. His thoughts were absorbed with little Andrei. At frequent intervals a leech would come up to him, change his dressings, and adjust his bandages.

"You're lucky. Everything is healing splendidly. You bled so profusely that now you are feeling easier. If you had not bled, you would have died."

"Yes, it does feel easier, but I'm very dizzy still."

"Anyone else would have been dead long ago after such a blow. But you are well on the way to recovery, son."

"Are you, by any chance, from Ryazan, grandad?"

"Ay, that I am. Come to think of it, I've met you before. I treated your young woman there."

"She's not my wife, and I do not know her whereabouts. . . ."

"I seem to remember seeing her on Kulikovo Plain. She came along with the Horde. Now I expect she's free. She found her kinsfolk there, and came in Mamai's retinue. She never lagged behind."

"And how comes it that you are here?"

"I was in Klim's contingent. When Klim was killed . . ."

"Killed?"

"Did you know him?"

"Yes . . ."

"Well, had he not been killed, he could all the same not have gone on living in Ryazan. Our Oleg would have made the place too hot for him."

"One is filled with awe when one thinks how great and powerful Dmitri has become. He is soaring high."

"While we, after fighting and fighting, have nothing to take home but our old misery."

"Did you see all the gold which was taken from the Horde? Has a single grain of it fallen to your share? Where is it? And yet it was we who captured it."

"I'm taking back a Kossog coat, but it's all soaked in blood and torn to boot."

"Then why take it along?"

"Well, you see, a man feels ashamed to get home empty-handed."

So they jogged on for at least a fortnight. The mounted troops, the Princes, and Dmitri were far ahead. News from them filtered through to the lumbering convoy which straggled along for many a day.

They heard that entire populations from all the towns and villages along the way had thronged to greet the army, how bells pealed throughout the land, how Russia was raising her head at long last. . . .

One day, just as dawn was breaking, they heard a distant chime. Kyrill started. He recognized the bells of Kolomna.

He sat up in the cart, straining his eyes into the distance. When would the town come into his field of vision?

The tall black ridge of the cathedral rose above a wood, only to disappear again among the trees.

On the summit of a far-off hill Kyrill caught a glimpse of the towers. Smoke, thick as milk, drifted over the houses. The translucent, abundant waters of the Oka stretched wide before him.

They waited a long time to be ferried across, for many carts crowded the side of the river. The earliest arrivals were the first to be taken across. All day, all evening, all night they waited. During the night it started to drizzle. Kyrill pulled some matting over him and lay shivering.

At last morning dawned.

The carts were drawn up on the ferry; water flowed around, gurgling and splashing against the pontoons. The horses pricked up their ears, glancing nervously at this huge quantity of water.

Kyrill looked hungrily down at the swirling eddies.

He must have been worn out, for his strength failed him and his head swam when the cart reached the bank.

The shore was thronged with people who had come out to meet the convoy. Wives sought their husbands, fathers their sons, children their fathers. There were cheers and shouts, the chiming of bells, rejoicing, and from somebody came a woeful lament—probably a poor soul had learnt from the wounded that she had no one any longer to await.

But threading the multitudinous rumour there came such a heartening sound of jubilation, there shone such joy in so many a tearstained eye, that Kyrill, overcome with faintness, closed his eyes with the thought:

"It seems as though they were greeting me, too—as if I, also, were being cheered."

Like a spontaneous answer to this thought, there grew within him, like a sapling oak, slowly but surely, a great joy. All the outrages, troubles, burdens of the past were gone. A new life was beginning. His motherland for whom he had fought would no longer repudiate, condemn, or harm him.

Smilingly he opened his eyes. Suddenly a woman's face, tense with surprise—or could it have been joy?—flitted before his gaze. Overcome with weakness, he again closed his eyes.

"Eyebrows just like Aniuta's . . ."

How good it was to hear the cartwheels rattle over the log streets of Kolomna as they pulled up the hill! How good it was to hearken to the familiar bells! He had come home again.

As the transports reached the top of the hill and halted in the cathedral square he recovered consciousness. A hand, lightly but firmly, plucked away his coverings.

"Is he alive?"

Kyrill's eyes opened wide.

Wrapped in a huge shawl to keep out the rain, Aniuta stood before him as though she were rousing him from a heavy sleep.

"Can you get up?"

"Lend me a hand."

Painfully he raised himself. He sat in the cart so as to brace himself. A guard came up.

"Are you going to stay here?"

Kyrill looked at Aniuta, who was hanging on his words, and at the policeman who awaited his reply.

"Yes."

"That's all right, then," said the officer as he moved away.

Softly, as in a dream, Kyrill said:

"I have a son . . ."

He opened his eyes.

"I've been looking for you everywhere."

She made him lean on her shoulder and, seizing him by the belt, led him onwards. Kyrill shuffled along heavily. Aniuta encouraged him.

"Lean on me. Don't be afraid. I'm strong and can bear it."

At times he felt dizzy from fatigue and spoke incoherently:

"She herself was tortured, living as she had to under an alien yoke. Now she is freed from that. We are all together . . ."

As she guided him along Aniuta listened to his rambling words.

"Are you talking about me?"

He shook his head feebly.

"Russia . . . If only I can get well again . . ."

"You'll be all right. Step out firmly. I, too, was always asking: 'Have you met so and so?' But they said 'No.' So I told myself, 'If he has not been slain, he will come back to me. He can't possibly not have been over there.' So I searched the whole army, and now I've found you. Don't be afraid, you're not likely to trip."

"And I combed Ryazan for you."

"Well, Mamai killed my brother, my little nephews were carried off to the Horde. So why should I return there? Here I have my own home, such as it is. I had a narrow escape from them. Had I been at home that night I should now be in the Horde." And after a pause, she added: "Granny told me about you, that you had been round asking after me. So I thought to myself: 'If he's come once, he'll come again.'"

People were standing on either side of the street. They peered into his face. Someone shouted:

"Glory!"

"Here is the house."

Kyrill recognized it at once.

"You'll have to stoop a bit, for the lintel is low," Aniuta cautioned him.

Thus did he cross the threshold of her home.

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